

Australia:

Spanish defeat exposes vulnerability of Howard government

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Last weekend's defeat of the conservative Popular Party in the Spanish elections has visibly rattled the Howard government, exposing its acute political vulnerability. Despite ongoing claims of significant popular support, the government rests on an increasingly narrow social base, with large sections of the population deeply hostile to its foreign and domestic agenda.

Together with the mass media, Prime Minister John Howard and his ministers have responded to the events in Spain with fear and perplexity, combined with attempts to intimidate the continuing opposition to the US-led occupation of Iraq.

Spain's general election became the first official referendum on the Iraq war in any of the countries that joined Washington's aggression. The result underscored the fact that the movement expressed in last year's unprecedented global demonstrations, in which tens of millions of people marched against the war—as well as the shameless lies used to justify it—has by no means disappeared.

The Aznar government initially sought to politically exploit the terrorist bombing in Madrid by drumming up nationalist sentiment, assisted by the opposition PSOE socialists, who joined its calls for a show of national unity. Against all the evidence, the government instructed its officials and ambassadors to blame the Basque separatist ETA, hoping to focus the entire election on its self-proclaimed tough stand against the group's terrorist tactics.

But Aznar miscalculated badly. His attempt to deceive the population—yet another blatant lie in the “war on terror”—triggered outrage, particularly among young voters. Broad masses of Spaniards, the vast majority of whom have opposed the Iraq war all along, drew the conclusion that Aznar's support for US militarism had exposed them to what occurred on March 11.

The Australian political and media establishment has reacted with undisguised hostility to the election result, revealing its contempt for the democratic right of the population to determine its government. Howard accused the Spanish people of trying to “buy immunity from terrorism” by surrendering “in the face of intimidation by terrorists”.

Obviously fearing a similar fate at elections due later this year, Howard and his ministers have begun parroting the line first enunciated by President Bush in his “axis of evil” State of the Union address last year: “You are either with us, or with the terrorists”. Anyone opposed to the Iraq war is being slandered as an “appeaser” or dupe of Al Qaeda. This is nothing but an attempt to prevent any probing of the real agenda behind the Iraq war and the Australian government's unconditional participation in it.

So sensitive is the government to the opposition building up beneath

the surface of official politics that it feels, instinctively, that it has to silence any criticism or deviation from its position, no matter how limited. Hence the government's extraordinary upbraiding of Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty for suggesting on national television last Sunday that joining the war on Iraq had increased the terrorist threat. This perfectly plausible conclusion from the Madrid bombings has cut directly across the government's nervous denials that its involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq had made ordinary Australians targets.

Howard's chief of staff personally rang Keelty to berate him, before the police chief had even left the television studio where he had been interviewed. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, Defence Minister Robert Hill and armed forces chief General Peter Cosgrove were all wheeled out to condemn Keelty's observation. Downer literally accused Keelty of becoming a mouthpiece for Al Qaeda propaganda.

As commander of the extensive Australian policing operations in the Solomon Islands and throughout the Asia-Pacific, Keelty is a key operative in Canberra's neo-colonial operations in the region. But the government is so fragile that it cannot afford to have its stance called into question to the slightest degree. Increasingly, it is resorting to the heavy-handed methods of political thugs.

According to the government, Al Qaeda simply consists of evil madmen, who have an irrational hatred for Western civilisation. There is no question that Osama bin Laden and other Islamic fundamentalists have a deeply reactionary political agenda, which they pursue with wanton disregard for civilian lives. But their ability to find support among growing layers of disaffected and angry young people is rooted in the historical crimes committed by the US and other imperialist powers against the oppressed populations in the Middle East and around the world.

Washington's conquest of defenceless Iraq, utilising fabricated claims of “weapons of mass destruction” as a means of gaining control of vast oil reserves and establishing US hegemony over the entire region, marks a qualitative escalation of imperialist aggression. If fundamentalists have been able to profit from the escalating resentment fuelled by Iraq's descent into chaos and impoverishment under US military rule, Washington and its allies bear the primary responsibility.

Those in official circles now fulminating against the Spanish election result are among the worst purveyors of the lies used to launch the Iraq war. The *Australian's* Greg Sheridan declared the Spanish election result “a disaster for the war on terror and a tragedy for the coalition of the willing”. Two days before the election, more

than 10 million people demonstrated throughout Spain against the Madrid atrocity. Yet Sheridan accused them of mass cowardice. Osama bin Laden had “frightened a Western electorate into ditching its government, into running away from the Americans”.

Last July 10, under the headline “WMD doubts are ludicrous,” Sheridan claimed that “the US has material in its possession in Iraq which, if it checks out, will be conclusive evidence of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction programs. The evidence that Hussein had WMD programs is so overwhelming, he [John Bolton, US Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and Security] can barely understand how it is doubted”. Two days later, Sheridan reported that the Bush administration had “decisive proof” of chemical, biological and nuclear weapon stockpiles.

These claims have proven to be utterly false. But as far as Sheridan and the *Australian* are concerned, that is now past history. They feel no compunction to account or apologise for deceiving their readers. Instead, they have manufactured a new set of lies: opposition to the Iraq war equals appeasement of Al Qaeda.

The *Australian’s* March 16 editorial asserted: “Those who say we have brought the threat upon ourselves and that renouncing the war against Saddam Hussein and abandoning the US alliance would take us off the target list, ignore the lessons of history, and defy commonsense. Such arguments are directly descended from those of the European appeasers in the 1930s, who were willing to give Nazi Germany whatever it wanted as the price of peace.”

As a matter of fact, the Bush administration and its allies have committed the very war crime laid against the Nazis at the Nuremberg trials—the unleashing of an unprovoked war of aggression. They did so with contemptuous disregard for the opposition of masses of people, not only in Spain but in Britain, Australia, the US and around the world.

Now their media apologists insist that the population must accept the constant danger of terrorist retaliation, along with the elimination of basic democratic rights. “We have no option but to stand firm against our enemies and accept that the risk of a terror attack in Australia is a fact of life, just as the people of London, Moscow, New York and Tel Aviv have done for years,” the *Australian* editorial stated.

The editorial’s conclusion dovetailed with that of the Howard government: that the police and security forces must be given greater resources and powers, including the right to detain and interrogate “suspects” without charge or trial. It called for continued bipartisan backing for such police-state measures from the Labor Party.

No doubt unintentionally, the *Australian’s* conclusion pointed to an inescapable political fact: the Howard government has only been able to pursue its agenda because of the critical political support extended to it by the official Labor opposition. In the lead-up to the war, Labor subscribed fully to all the WMD fabrications. Its differences with the invasion were essentially tactical; it would have preferred that the UN had rubberstamped the operation. As soon as the onslaught began, the party fell in behind the decision to commit Australian troops.

Ever since, Labor has sought to shield the government from the collapse of its lies, joining hands behind the fatuous notion that an “intelligence failure” was responsible. This week, Labor leader Mark Latham has done his best to keep the issues buried in the wake of the Spanish election. “We can’t go down a time tunnel and reverse any of the decisions that were made prior to Iraq,” he told the *Australian*.

These events raise serious political questions. The eruption of US militarism threatens new wars of aggression around the globe, most

immediately against North Korea, Iran or Syria. The Howard government has unequivocally committed itself to this agenda. But the perspective of last year’s global demonstrations—that the UN, European governments or social democratic opposition parties could be pressured to stop the war—has proved to be a complete dead-end.

Renewed demonstrations and protests, no matter how justifiable, will not prevent further wars, or the ever-escalating assault on democratic rights and social conditions. The roots of these developments lie in the fundamental contradictions of the US and world economy, nowhere more clearly expressed than in the widening gulf between rich and poor.

The Bush administration cynically exploited the September 11 terror attacks to pursue previously drawn-up plans to wrest control over the oil and gas-rich Middle East and Central Asia for the benefit of corporate America. Likewise, its Australian allies pledged themselves to the “coalition of the willing” with definite strategic and business calculations in mind. Participation in the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq was the price paid to obtain Washington’s licence for the Howard government’s own predatory activities in the Asia-Pacific.

These processes will not be stopped by replacing Howard with Latham, any more than replacing George W. Bush with John Kerry, who has already joined the president in pressuring the incoming Spanish government to keep troops in Iraq. The working class needs a new perspective, based on internationalist, democratic and socialist principles, in order to fight for political power in its own right. Only then can the root causes of terrorism—oppression and poverty—be abolished, through the reorganisation of social and economic life on a world scale along egalitarian lines.

The Socialist Equality Party therefore calls on working people in Australia to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the Middle East, as well as the Asia-Pacific region; to unreservedly defend the right of their people to determine their own future; and to demand that billions of dollars in emergency aid be provided for their pressing economic and social needs.



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