

Australian government faces new charges of manipulating intelligence

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Over the past two weeks, the government of Prime Minister John Howard has faced a virtual revolt from within the Australian military and intelligence establishment, involving the leaking of damaging secret documents. Long-simmering opposition to the government's manipulation and suppression of intelligence reports for its own political purposes has erupted, following the collapse of all the lies used to justify Australian participation in the invasion of Iraq.

The controversy began on April 14 when the *Bulletin* newsmagazine, controlled by media magnate Kerry Packer, published two classified documents, both demanding a royal commission into the performance of the intelligence and counter-intelligence services.

One was a letter written to Howard last month by a former high-ranking Army intelligence expert, Lieutenant Colonel Lance Collins. He listed a litany of what he termed "poor performance or outright failures" by the intelligence agencies in recent years. They included the unanticipated 1998 fall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, the 1999 Indonesian military-backed massacres in East Timor, the October 2002 Bali bombings and the absence of any "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq.

His language indicated seething discontent throughout the upper echelons of the military and spy agencies. "I strongly urge you, Prime Minister, to appoint an impartial, open and wide-ranging Royal Commission into Intelligence," he wrote. "To do otherwise would merely cultivate an artificial scab over the putrefaction beneath."

Collins specifically charged that a pro-Indonesian stance taken by the peak Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO)—reflecting government policy—led to the suppression of his military intelligence reports, from July 1998 onward, warning that the Indonesian high command was preparing a bloodbath in the event that the East Timorese moved to secede.

Collins also accused the DIO of temporarily cutting off intelligence to him and the troops involved in the subsequent Australian-led intervention into Timor because of his refusal to bow to orders to "desist" from raising the issue. According to Collins, the DIO leadership was so intent on silencing him that it was prepared to compromise the security and safety of Australian soldiers in a combat zone.

Collins' accusations carry considerable weight because they come from such a senior officer. In the mid-1990s, he became deputy director of military intelligence, one of the most sensitive military postings. From September 1999 to February 2000, he was principal intelligence officer for General Peter Cosgrove, the commander of the Timor intervention force.

The second secret document was a report filed by a naval barrister, Captain Martin Toohey, last September into a "redress of grievance" complaint by Collins after three years of official victimisation. Toohey's 36-page report, published almost in its entirety by the *Bulletin*, backed up Collins' accusations about Timor and found that Collins was ostracised, denied promotion and driven to the brink of a mental breakdown because he had spoken the truth.

Toohey detailed an array of vindictive measures taken against Collins,

including having his name splashed throughout the media in September 2001 as the subject of an Australian Federal Police search warrant over the earlier leaking of secret Timor documents exposing the government's squashing of intelligence reports on the impending massacre. His career as an intelligence officer was effectively killed off.

Like Collins, Toohey speaks with considerable military authority. A Vietnam veteran, he was deputy director of Naval Security and a naval police investigator for 16 years and currently holds a top-secret security clearance.

He supported Collins' charge that "a pro-Jakarta lobby exists in DIO, which distorts intelligence estimates to the extent that those estimates are heavily driven by Government policy which overlooks (or attributes the blame to other factions), atrocities and terrorist activities committed by the TNI [the Indonesian army]". He concluded that "DIO reports what the government wants to hear".

According to Toohey's findings, Collins was told by Australian Defence Force Chief General John Baker in 1998 not to worry about the looming events in Timor "because we have a plan with the Indonesians to keep everybody else out of East Timor".

This was a clear reference to the government's efforts throughout 1998, in the wake of Suharto's fall, to keep out Portugal, the former colonial ruler of East Timor. Portugal had resumed its claims to sovereignty during the 1990s, with the backing of the European Union. It challenged the 1989 Timor Gap Treaty, under which Australia had acquired the lion's share of the vast offshore Timor Sea oil and gas fields, as a reward for being the only country in the world to formally recognise the Indonesian annexation of East Timor.

While Collins and Toohey refer to a "pro-Jakarta" lobby in the DIO, the fact is that until 1998-99 the entire political establishment regarded its alliance with the Suharto military dictatorship as the bedrock of Australia's regional security. But with Suharto's downfall, and with Portugal breathing down their necks, Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer swung behind a UN autonomy ballot.

Still anxious to protect Canberra's long-standing relations with the Indonesian military and political leadership, they blamed the militia violence in the lead-up to the August ballot on "rogue elements" in the armed forces. They strongly opposed the deployment of UN monitors, arguing instead that security should be left in the hands of the Indonesian military and police—the very forces organising the violence.

Despite feigning concern for the plight of the population, Howard and Downer calculated that post-poll atrocities would provide the pretext to dispatch troops to Timor with the overriding purpose of retaining control over the Timor Sea oil and gas projects against Australia's rivals.

Howard and Defence Minister Robert Hill have flatly rejected Collins' demand for a royal commission. In the past, such investigations, usually headed by handpicked judges, have functioned, in the main, as whitewashes. But because of the breadth and depth of the opposition it is facing, this government simply cannot afford to launch an inquiry with the

legal powers to call official witnesses and obtain classified documents.

While—for public consumption—Howard and his ministers have promised to reply fully and “courteously” to Collins’ letter, they have done everything they can to vilify and intimidate him. Once again, they have resorted to bullying, character assassination and the selective use of secret documents—methods that have become characteristic of the Howard government. Despite the fact that Collins has specifically directed his criticisms toward the government, Howard accused him, along with everyone else calling for a royal commission, of casting a “generalised smear” over military intelligence officials.

Last week, Hill released a last-minute legal opinion that the government secretly requested from another military lawyer last December with a view to undermining Toohey’s report. Without interviewing a single witness, Colonel Richard Tracey accused Toohey of making unsubstantiated findings and exceeding his jurisdiction. But two days later, Hill was forced to admit the existence of, and make public, an earlier legal opinion, written by Colonel Roger Brown last September, endorsing Toohey’s conclusions as “firmly supported on the evidence”.

Collins had been shown none of the legal reports, and there is every indication that he would never have seen them if the *Bulletin* had not published the leaked Toohey report.

With the government’s position unravelling in the wake of Hill’s embarrassing admission, General Cosgrove, currently the Chief of the Defence Forces, was wheeled out to reject Collins’ charges as unfounded and damaging to the security services. His credibility was not helped by the fact that he wrote a glowing testimonial for Collins in 2000, describing him as “very intelligent, perceptive and quick” as well as “very honest, moral and loyal”.

Incensed by his treatment, Collins has refused to be silenced, defying orders from Cosgrove not to release a public statement last week. Collins said he was “dismayed” by Hill’s prejudicial release of reports on his case and demanded the release of all the documents used to investigate his accusations. Similarly, Toohey has spoken out this week, labelling the government’s treatment of his report as “yet another shabby, tawdry cover-up,” designed to “slur” his professional reputation.

The stand taken by Collins and Toohey is a sure sign that they have significant support within the military elite. This was confirmed by a series of further statements last week. Retired Major-General Mike Smith, a former deputy commander of the Timor intervention force, backed Collins’ charges and said the politicisation of the military and public service was worsening. Moreover, Australia should not have joined the Iraq invasion, which had made Australia an increased terrorist target, he said.

The head of the Australian Defence Association, retired army intelligence officer Neil James accused the DIO of refusing to tolerate dissenting views and spoke of “incredible concern in the defence force community” that the DIO had cut off information to forces on the ground in Timor. A senior former Defence Department adviser, Jane Errey, charged the government with dismissing her for refusing to write a briefing paper saying that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. [See: Australian defence adviser sacked for refusing to write WMD lies]

Collins’ call for a royal commission was joined by the mother of Mervyn Jenkins, an Australian military intelligence attaché in Washington, who committed suicide in June 1999 after being threatened with serious criminal charges for handing sensitive Timor material to his US partners. Such exchanges of information were routine, but the Timor documents reported the Indonesian preparations for atrocities, which the Howard government did not want to divulge to anyone at that stage, not even Washington. Jenkins’ mother condemned the government for treating Collins in the same way it had treated her son.

Then came much-publicised details from a report by the Rand Corporation, an influential Pentagon-linked US thinktank, accusing the

Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) of “blatantly disregarding” threat assessments relating to the Bali bombings. Citing interviews with serving Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers, the Rand report also concluded that ASIO “deliberately withholds” information from the AFP, based on “its own idiosyncratic calculation of the national interest”.

These revelations and accusations provide just a glimpse of the acrimony that the government has created inside the state apparatus, particularly since the 2001 election campaign.

Facing almost certain defeat at that election, because of popular opposition to his free-market agenda, Howard resorted to lies and dirty tricks to crawl back into office. Leading government figures prevailed upon the army, navy, air force and SAS, as well as the military and civilian intelligence agencies and senior public servants, to line up behind a campaign of slanders against asylum seekers and whip up fears of terrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks in the United States.

The Chief of the Defence Forces, Admiral Barrie and other senior naval commanders were required to back the government’s false claims that refugees had thrown their children overboard in an attempt to force authorities to allow them into Australia. Only after the election was it revealed that navy photographs were doctored and misleadingly labelled and that so-called intelligence material on the incident compiled by the Office of National Assessments (ONA) was based on nothing but media reports, which had been generated by the government’s own lies.

At a later parliamentary inquiry, Admiral Barrie was forced to retract his initial testimony after being humiliatingly contradicted by subordinates. It turned out that dozens of government and military personnel knew, within days of the incident, that children were not thrown off the boat. A former Admiral accused the government of a Goebbels-style Big Lie campaign, while other senior military figures accused Howard of misusing the navy for political purposes, destroying its credibility and creating profound mistrust within its ranks. Howard, however, continued to deny any wrongdoing, claiming the problem was simply one of “communication”.

Tensions reached a new height last month, in the wake of the defeat of the Aznar government in Spain, one of the few staunch supporters—together with Howard’s government—of the Bush administration’s war on Iraq. Howard and leading ministers denounced AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty for stating the obvious: that Australia’s participation in the Iraq war had made its population, like the Spanish people, a more likely terrorist target. Foreign Minister Downer accused Keelty of peddling Al Qaeda propaganda. General Cosgrove was ordered into the fray to declare his disagreement with Keelty.

Howard and Downer were later forced to beat an ignominious retreat, repeatedly stating their confidence in the police chief. Last week, Keelty revealed that he had been on the brink of resigning before Howard and Downer performed their backflip.

The bitter rifts within the security apparatus and attacks on the government have become intertwined with deep-going conflicts within the entire political and corporate establishment over foreign policy and strategic orientation. With the war on Iraq becoming an unmitigated disaster, elements in ruling circles, such as former prime minister Malcolm Fraser, who have expressed reservations about Howard’s unconditional alignment with Washington, have latched onto the internal discontent.

The *Bulletin’s* editor-in-chief, Garry Linnell, wrote: “If, as Toohey has found, a ‘pro-Jakarta’ lobby exists with defence intelligence and shapes its reports to the government based on this bias, how certain can we be that the rest of the intelligence the government relies upon is also not subject to similar biases? A pattern is already evident. The so-called intelligence evidence relied upon by the United States, the United Kingdom and the Australia as justification for the war in Iraq lies in shreds.”

Linnell pointed out that Howard “has staked his personal future, and that of his government, on the promise of protecting Australia’s national security” and that “without a royal commission, that promise will sound hollow”. But with his political survival so bound up with the Bush administration and its “war on terror,” Howard cannot afford to have any serious probe into his government’s actual record.

Howard has sought to shelter behind an existing inquiry into the “performance of the intelligence agencies,” which was established following a parliamentary committee report on the lies used to justify the Iraq invasion. The inquiry is designed to be a whitewash—it is being conducted by Philip Flood, a former Australian ambassador to Indonesia, secretary of the Foreign Affairs Department and ONA chief, who was a central figure in the official pro-Jakarta policy during the 1990s.

The parliamentary report itself disclosed ONA and DIO material that demonstrated that the Howard government—closely following the line laid down by the Bush and Blair administrations—cynically orchestrated and exaggerated intelligence to claim that Iraq possessed dangerous stockpiles of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, the bipartisan parliamentary committee politically exonerated the government and shifted all responsibility onto the DIO and ONA.

Howard has emphasised that two veteran Labor politicians, former defence ministers Kim Beazley and Robert Ray, helped draft the parliamentary report. With Labor’s help, he hopes to divert the latest revelations in the same direction—that is, into an examination of alleged “intelligence failures” rather than the criminal policies of the government. Labor leader Mark Latham has demonstrated his readiness to cooperate by suggesting that the Flood inquiry be given royal commission powers to investigate the latest allegations.

The other parliamentary parties, the Australian Democrats and Greens have taken a similar stance, calling for a royal commission to investigate “intelligence failures”. Greens’ leader Bob Brown called for an inquiry “to find out not just what went wrong but how we restructure, re-equip, re-personnel the intelligence agencies so that they are able to cope with the new situation Australia finds itself in”.

As in 2001, this closing of the parliamentary ranks will only encourage the government to respond to its political crisis by ratcheting up the “war on terror” and stepping up its attacks on its political opponents.



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