

Australian prime minister visits Baghdad amid US-led bloodbath

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Last Sunday, as US troops were unleashing a bloodbath against the Iraqi population, Australian Prime Minister John Howard made a flying visit to Baghdad. The purpose of the trip was two-fold: to send a message to Washington that his government would “stay the course” in the wake of Spain’s withdrawal and the disaster facing US-led forces, and to try to legitimise Australia’s participation in the face of growing hostility and revulsion at home.

Mimicking the stunt carried out by President Bush last year on Thanksgiving Day, Howard seized upon Anzac Day—the national commemoration of Australia’s involvement in the ill-fated attack on Gallipoli during World War I—to emphasise his ongoing commitment to the murderous US occupation.

While Australia’s military presence is purely symbolic—it only has around 300 troops inside Iraq—every detail of Howard’s visit was designed to ape that of the US president. All the travel arrangements were shrouded in secrecy. The media was instructed to keep quiet on the affair until 12 noon, while a small number of individually selected journalists was informed only hours before departing that Howard would be on the flight. The reporters were forced to surrender their mobile phones before being permitted to board the plane.

After landing in an unnamed Gulf state, the contingent flew into Baghdad aboard a Hercules military plane. The failure of the occupying forces to establish any level of security was demonstrated when the aircraft was forced to take “tactical evasive action” against the threat of a surface-to-air missile attack. As one journalist described it, “staff, security personnel and journalists hung on for dear life in the plastic-webbing seats [as] the flight crew zig-zagged, weaved and tilted the giant aircraft at 700km/h, just 76m above

the treetops”.

In Baghdad for just six hours, Howard met Australian soldiers within the confines of the heavily fortified Baghdad airport. Outside its precincts, US-led forces were facing the continuing Iraqi resistance movement. Even as Howard spoke to the troops, repeated bursts of automatic gunfire were heard coming from across the city. *Reuters* reported that shortly after the Australian entourage entered the Iraqi capital, US troops shot into a crowd of civilians after a roadside bomb hit their Humvee. Up to four children were reported killed.

Howard also held talks with US pro-consul Paul Bremer, as well as John Abizaid and Ricardo Sanchez, the two senior US military commanders in Iraq, and two Iraqi stooges from the US-appointed Governing Council. Although his schedule included meeting with sailors on board the HMAS *Stuart*, an Australian warship patrolling Iraqi waters, it had to be abandoned after a suicide attack targeting an Iraqi offshore oil terminal killed three Americans and wounded at least four others. The *Stuart* was diverted to assist the injured sailors.

On his return, Howard immediately announced additional funding of \$150 million for Australia’s ongoing participation in the occupation, at least until the end of the financial year in June 30, 2005. Emphasising that his commitment was entirely open-ended, Howard said the mention of mid-2005 “doesn’t mean we’re going to leave on that date, it simply means we’re making prudent provision for being in Iraq for a while yet... We recognise that [Australian troops] are not going to be home quickly.” Responding to behind-the-scenes pressure from the White House, the prime minister went on to raise the possibility that he would increase the number of Australian soldiers deployed in the region, as well as dispatch a contingent

of Australian Federal Police.

From the outset of the “war on terror,” the Australian prime minister has been the most enthusiastic international supporter of the Bush administration, faithfully repeating all its lies and collaborating in all its crimes. This latest commitment is aimed at shoring up the “coalition of the willing” as the Iraqi quagmire worsens and the various participating countries come under mounting popular pressure to withdraw.

At home, Howard has staked everything on a successful outcome in Iraq. His aggressive pursuit of Australian corporate interests in the Pacific region, including the virtual take-over of the Solomon Islands and neo-colonial interventions in Papua New Guinea and Nauru have all been based on Bush’s doctrine of “pre-emptive war”. US failure in Iraq could spell disaster for Howard.

Moreover, a federal election is due later this year with wide layers of the population deeply hostile to the government’s brutal social and economic policies and its unprecedented assault on democratic rights. Unable to campaign on any of these issues, Howard is banking on a “national security” election, touting his close relations with the US and success in Iraq. As in the last federal election campaign in 2001, he is already seeking to divert attention from the mounting social crisis and unprecedented levels of social inequality by fomenting fears and hysteria about the threat of terrorism.

Howard’s visit served to underscore the unanimity of the entire political establishment on the illegal US-led war. While Labor leader Mark Latham has made great play of his call for Australian troops to be brought home from Iraq by Christmas, he has no opposition to the occupation *per se*, and supported Howard’s trip. “Anzac Day should be above politics,” he declared. “So I hope he has a safe visit there and back, and they can share the Anzac spirit that’s so important in our country and feel the strong emotion of this day, just as we have all around Australia today.”

Shadow defence minister Chris Evans’s only complaint was that Latham had not been invited to go along. “We’ve certainly had a position of trying to provide bipartisan support for the troops,” he insisted. “We’ve been at great pains to support the troops. They and their families would have appreciated both sides of politics being represented on the visit.”

Bob Brown, leader of the Greens, chastised Howard along similar lines. “Anzac Day is way above politics and it needs to be kept very non partisan,” he said. “John Howard has had 400 days to be in Baghdad since the invasion began, including last Anzac Day. Choosing Anzac Day now when we are a month or two out from an election, I think it would have been very wise, proper and dignified for him to have asked Mark Latham to go with him.”

Their reaction to Howard’s trip serves to highlight the utterly rotten basis of Labor’s and the Greens’ so-called “anti-war” position. Both parties argue that Australian troops should be withdrawn, not because of the illegal and criminal nature of the war itself, but because they need to be deployed closer to home.

“It’s in our interests to bring our troops home for the security of our own region, promoting the security of our own region. We can’t have our nation’s policies determined by the White House,” declared Bob Brown. “We can have a great relationship with the US and we want to have that, but that relationship has to be built on equal strength and independence of policy and a recognition of each other’s needs.”

As for Labor, its preoccupation is to prove itself the more reliable and effective party of “national security”. In a speech to the party faithful last Tuesday, Bob Hawke, who was Labor prime minister from 1983 to 1991 and committed Australian troops to the first Gulf War, made this crystal clear. “The truth is that no Australian prime minister has ever put this country at greater risk and for the wrong reason than John Howard with this lock-step performance with George Bush on Iraq,” he said. “[I]t’s time that this myth of superior conservative competence on defence and national security be understood for the humbug that it is.”



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