

Former top Australian officials denounce Howard for deception over Iraq War

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With an Australian federal election looming, the Howard government has been thrown into further crisis following high-level criticism of its foreign policy and strategic orientation. In an unprecedented move, 43 former top public servants, diplomats and military leaders signed a statement published on August 9 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* calling for “truth in government” and admonishing Prime Minister John Howard for lying about why he sent Australian troops to support Washington’s unilateral war on Iraq.

The statement bluntly asserts: “Australia was committed to join the invasion of Iraq on the basis of false assumptions and the deception of the Australian people”. It continues: “Saddam’s dictatorial administration has ended, but removing him was not the reason given to the Australian people for going to war. The Prime Minister said in March 2003 that our policy was the disarmament of Iraq, not the removal of Saddam Hussein”. The document warns that the intervention in Iraq has been “destructive” and “the international system has been subjected to enormous stress that still continues”.

Shaken by the damning criticism, Howard lashed out at the signatories during question time in parliament on Monday denouncing them as “habitual critics of the Australian government”. He is only too aware, however, that all are pro-establishment luminaries with years of service in the state apparatus. Some are even Liberal Party supporters. Their backgrounds only make their accusations against Howard all the more plausible.

The signatories include figures such as one-time secretary of the Prime Minister’s Department and ambassador to Japan, John Menadue, former secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and ambassador to the UN and Indonesia, Richard Woolcott, former high commissioner to Malaysia and

ambassador to the UN Security Council and Thailand, Cavan Hogue, along with retired Australian Defence Force chief Alan Beaumont and former head of the navy Vice Admiral Sir Richard Peek.

The statement comes as the government faces mounting political problems, with every justification for the war on Iraq—from claims that the Hussein regime had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction, to Baghdad’s supposed connections with Al Qaeda—revealed as barefaced lies. Even Howard’s pathetic claim that the purpose of the invasion was to bring freedom and democracy to Iraq has fallen to pieces, under the impact of ongoing and widespread national resistance to the occupation, along with evidence of systematic torture of Iraqi citizens by US forces in Abu Ghraib.

The statement of the 43 testifies to the deep-going rift that has opened up within Australia’s ruling circles. The signatories articulate the concerns of powerful sections of the ruling class that have become increasingly anxious about Howard’s open-ended support for Washington’s neo-colonial ambitions. They fear that, under conditions where the US is regarded with deepening resentment throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Howard’s position could compromise Australia’s long-term economic and strategic interests.

This is why the statement warns: “It is of concern to us that the international prestige of the United States and its Presidency has fallen over the last two years. Because of our government’s unquestioning support for the Bush administration, Australia had been adversely affected”.

Nevertheless, the signatories back the so-called “war on terrorism,” which has been used by the Bush administration and its allies to justify military aggression abroad and the repression of democratic

rights at home. Their worry is that Washington's reckless intervention into Iraq will make it more difficult to employ such a pretext in the future. The statement laments: "It is of regret that the action to combat terrorism after 11 September, 2001, launched in Afghanistan, and widely supported, was diverted to the widely opposed invasion of Iraq."

While advocating that Australia follow a more independent line, the signatories are well aware that Australian imperialism is too weak to stand alone. With this in mind, they declare: "We do not wish to see Australia's alliance with the US endangered" but "to suggest that an ally is not free to choose if or when it will go to war is to misread the ANZUS treaty".

The 43 former officials are concerned that the government's blatant lies about Iraq will undermine the ability of future governments to win public support for military aggression. Declaring that "a re-elected Howard government or an elected Latham government must give priority to truth in government" their document insists, "Australians must be able to believe they are being told the truth by our leaders, especially in situations as grave as committing our forces to war."

That the statement was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, the two major Fairfax dailies, adds to growing evidence that the Fairfax media empire is moving to throw its support behind Labor and its new leader, Mark Latham, in the forthcoming election. The statement's release certainly served to put Howard on the defensive. Moreover, the day before its publication, Fairfax's *Sunday Sun Herald* carried an editorial ridiculing Howard's claim that Latham was anti-American because he once labeled Bush as "dangerous", and dismissing the prime minister's accusation that Labor in government would endanger the US-Australian alliance.

The editorial declared: "Latham has consistently stated his and Labor's support for the US-alliance". It went on to praise the Labor leader for appointing the unabashed militarist Kim Beazley—who earned the nickname "Bomber Beazley" when he was Minister for Defence in the Hawke Labor government—to the critical portfolio of defence. The editorial argued that the US alliance had "weathered many storms" and that "the suggestion that a rightwing Labor government would endanger it is reckless hyperbole."

The editorial pointed out approvingly that the

Australian Labor Party (ALP) had no principled opposition, at any time, to the Iraq war, inferring that it would have no compunction about using similar methods, albeit with suitable cover, to further Australia's national interests in the future. "The ALP said specifically it was not anti-war; it was merely pro-UN authority for the war..."



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