Australia: Howard's 2001 election lies return to haunt him

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Australian Prime Minister John Howard's lies during the 2001 election campaign have caught up with him in the lead-up to this year's scheduled election, for which he has so far failed to set a date. Last week, two former senior public service officials came forward with specific evidence that Howard deliberately deceived the public just two days before the last poll on November 10, 2001.

They broke a three-year silence on the 2001 "children overboard" affair, a week after 43 former leading military, diplomatic and public officials issued a public statement calling for "truth in government" and condemning Howard for lying about why he sent Australian troops to Iraq.

Mike Scrafton, a former senior Defence Department official who was working in 2001 as an adviser to Defence Minister Peter Reith, wrote a letter to the *Australian* newspaper on August 16 in response to the statement of the 43. Scrafton revealed that he had personally conveyed to Howard, in three telephone conversations on November 7, 2001, information that demolished the government's claim that Iraqi and other asylum seekers had thrown their children overboard in a bid to secure entry into Australia. Howard, Reith and Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock spent the entire election campaign vilifying the 250 refugees after their hopelessly overcrowded and unseaworthy boat—subsequently dubbed the SIEV 4—was intercepted by the HMAS Adelaide on October 7 that year.

Scrafton told Howard that (1) an unreleased military video of the incident, previously cited by Reith as absolute proof that the story was true, was inconclusive at best; (2) still photographs released to the media by Reith purportedly showing children in the ocean after being thrown into the water by their parents were in fact taken the next day, after the SIEV 4 sank; (3) no-one in Defence still believed the government's story to be true; and (4) an Office of National Assessments (ONA) report supposedly confirming the government's claims seemed to be based on nothing but reports of the original unsubstantiated allegations made by Ruddock.

Scrafton said he had not spoken out earlier because of a "culture" of intimidation that had been created inside the public service, leading him to fear being victimised by the government and its senior bureaucrats. He took a public lie detector test to verify his account and said others involved were prepared to testify to the same effect. A day later, a retired high-ranking official, former Defence Department media relations chief Jenny McKenry, corroborated Scrafton's account, saying he had related his conversations with Howard to her the next morning, i.e., November 8, 2001.

Scrafton had been asked to view the video in the hope that the government could use the footage to shore up its slander, which had begun to unravel in the face of widespread disgust throughout the navy. A former navy chief, Sir Richard Peek, had denounced the government's "Nazi-style" ban on military personnel speaking to the media about the incident. In defiance of the censorship, HMAS Adelaide sailors had told members of the public that the "children overboard" allegations were false.

On the morning of November 7, the Acting Chief of the Defence Force, Air Marshal Angus Houston had officially informed Reith that children had not been thrown overboard. Later that day, navy chief Vice Admiral David Shackleton told reporters categorically that the navy had never reported that children were tossed in the sea. Ministerial minders then prevailed upon Shackleton to issue a statement that he was not contradicting the defence minister.

Despite Scrafton's unequivocal advice, the next day at the National Press Club, Howard—in his final major speech of the 2001 election campaign—quoted the spurious ONA report as proof of the accusation. Howard had in fact ordered the ONA, which is accountable to his department, to produce the document.

Howard deliberately continued the lie because it underpinned his entire election campaign, based on demonising asylum seekers and exploiting the "war on terror" to divert broad hostility to his government's social and economic agenda. Earlier in the week, with his internal party polling predicting defeat, the prime minister had directly intimated that refugees could be terrorists. His final election-eve newspaper advertisements proclaimed his central slogan: "We decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come."

Scrafton's revelations confirm that Howard, backed by a small cabal of senior advisers, bureaucrats, military commanders and intelligence chiefs, and assisted by a compliant media, orchestrated an anti-refugee scare campaign to ensure the government's re-election. Such was the hostility to his government that despite its inflammatory campaign, it barely won the election, ending up with a narrow seven-seat majority in the House of Representatives.

Hundreds of innocent lives were lost as a direct result of the government's efforts. Having maligned the refugees aboard the SIEV 4 (Suspected Illegal Entrant Vehicle Number 4), Howard and Ruddock nevertheless regarded the interception of the SIEV 4 as an initial failure of Operation Relex, the naval blockade they had imposed around the north of Australia to detect and turn back refugee boats. The HMAS Adelaide had fired warning shots at the rickety boat, boarded it and towed it back toward Indonesian waters, but the naval crew rescued its passengers when it finally capsized.

The government was intent on halting the flow of refugees altogether, a quest that finally succeeded after the sinking of another refugee boat, the SIEV X, which went down in the waters between Indonesian and Australia on October 19, 2001, drowning 353 people, including 150 children. Its passengers inexplicably perished in a zone under constant Australian naval and aerial surveillance, monitored on a daily basis by the government's top-level People Smuggling Task Force. Howard falsely claimed that the boat sank in Indonesian waters and then insisted that Australian authorities knew nothing of its whereabouts, and therefore no rescue operation had been possible.

Immediately after the drownings, Ruddock declared that the deaths

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"may have an upside ... In the sense that some people may see the dangers inherent in it." After the tragedy, only one more boat attempted the voyage from Indonesia, and it was turned back on the eve of the election.

After the election, Howard and his ministers barred Scrafton and all other ministerial staff from testifying to a Senate inquiry into the "children overboard" and SIEV X affairs. As evidence mounted that the government and its security agencies had received detailed daily intelligence reports about the SIEV X's movements, the gag was extended to a key witness, Rear Admiral Raydon Gates, who headed a military review of the case.

Despite having the power to subpoena witnesses, including Scrafton and Gates, the Labor Party members of the Senate inquiry, who held a majority with the Greens and Democrats, bowed to the government's wishes and eventually shut down the committee in August 2002. When the committee majority presented their report, it pinned all the blame for the "children overboard" lies on Reith, who had conveniently retired from politics, while claiming that no findings could be made against Howard, because of the lack of evidence resulting from the gag applied to ministerial staff.

As for the SIEV X, the senators completely exonerated the government, asserting that despite apparent "gaps" in the reporting of intelligence on the vessel, it was unlikely that any rescue operation could have been mounted in any case. Labor's capitulation was deeply rooted in its own complicity in the anti-refugee slanders throughout the 2001 election—Labor leader Kim Beazley joined Howard in denouncing the SIEV 4 refugees—and its fear of the destabilising consequences for the entire parliamentary set-up of exposing Howard's crimes.

Howard and his supporters have responded to Scrafton's letter with a typical mixture of dissembling, bullying and character assassination. Having previously had to admit that the "children overboard" claims were false, Howard fell back on his time-worn defence that he acted simply on advice from the military and intelligence agencies. At the same time, he attacked Scrafton for not placing his information before an earlier internal inquiry conducted by Howard's own department. Howard's former department boss, Max Moore-Wilton, labelled Scrafton a "weak personality", "without a fearless bone in his body". The vicious character of Moore-Wilton's intervention only served to underscore Scrafton's reference to the climate of fear established in the public service by Howard and his minions.

More fundamentally, Howard's response reflects a profound political crisis. Scrafton's revelations have become part of a wider collapse of the government's credibility, following the disintegration of every fabrication it used to justify joining Washington's illegal and disastrous invasion of Iraq.

Scrafton's letter prompted a further condemnation of Howard by Laura Whittle; a sailor who became a national hero after diving without a lifejacket from the deck of HMAS Adelaide to rescue children in danger of drowning after the SIEV 4 sank. Whittle told Tasmania's *Advocate* newspaper that she and her fellow sailors had felt betrayed when the incident was falsely depicted as children being thrown overboard. She said an asylum seeker who held a small girl over the water was begging naval staff to rescue her, not threatening to throw her overboard. "The man was wanting to get the child into our inflatable boat and to safety," she said.

This week, there were further signs of deep-seated recriminations within the state apparatus against Howard, when anonymous former intelligence analysts revealed that their agencies had repeatedly warned him and his senior ministers before the Iraq war that it would inflame tensions in the Middle East and heighten, not lessen, the danger of terrorism, contrary to Howard's claims.

To exploit the growing sentiment of public revulsion, the Labor Party released a dossier, *Truth Overboard - 27 Lies Told By John Howard And Counting*, listing Howard's major lies since taking office in 1996. But, as they did in 2001-02, the Labor leaders are continuing to seek to contain the political crisis by reconvening the same Senate inquiry that whitewashed the "children overboard" affair in 2002, so that it can take evidence from Scrafton and McKenry. Far from calling for Howard's resignation for deceiving the population, they are trying to push the scandal back into the safe waters of a parliamentary committee.

Former leader Beazley, who was defence minister in the Hawke Labor government, and whom Latham recently recalled as Labor's defence spokesman, is playing a central role. While he retains close links with the military brass and is acting as a conduit for their grievances, he has dismissed suggestions that Howard should be forced to quit.

With all the Iraq lies exposed, elements within the establishment appear to be increasingly worried by the damage that Howard has done to the credibility of the military and intelligence apparatus, as well as the political system as a whole. These fears overlap with anxieties that Howard's unconditional backing for Washington's militarism could harm Australia's economic and strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region. There is also concern that Howard's falsifications will make it more difficult to secure public support for future military interventions, as well as domestic policies to satisfy the requirements of the corporate elite.

Rupert Murdoch's outlets, which remain vehement supporters of the Iraq war and Howard's alignment with the Bush administration, have expressed concerns that Howard's lies have become so exposed that they have undermined support for the occupation of Iraq and the government's overall refugee policy. In its August 17 editorial, the *Australian* bitterly complained that Howard's unnecessary "political bastardry" on his "children overboard" claims had allowed the "moral middle class" and the "chattering class" to question his government's legitimacy.

For the *Australian* to try to distance itself from Howard's "bastardry" is remarkable. Together with the rest of Murdoch's empire, it has done everything possible to sensationalise and promote Howard's fabrications, from "children overboard" to "weapons of mass destruction".

These acrimonious rifts in ruling circles are essentially tactical. Above all, there is alarm at the extent of opposition and resentment among masses of ordinary people. A Murdoch media opinion poll this week provided one glimpse of the shift against the government. It showed that a clear majority of people—some 61 percent—now want refugees to be allowed to enter the country. Three years ago, at the height of Howard's hysterical campaign, the same poll claimed there was 56 percent support for turning back all refugee boats.

Then came the news that, according to a recent survey, nearly half of young people aged 12 to 15 consider that Australia is an undemocratic and unfair country. Under these conditions, Howard is clearly floundering. He confronts mounting disaffection not just on refugee and foreign policy, but on his government's ongoing assault on public health, education, jobs and working conditions. Various media polls have estimated that if Howard called an election now his government would suffer a landslide defeat, by 6 to 11 percentage points.

All year, Howard has repeatedly encouraged speculation that he would call an early election, only to pull back on every occasion after receiving polling warnings that he would be swept from office. In a sign of desperation, he last week floated the possibility of delaying the election until next year—he could call it as late as May. This would mean taking the risk that George Bush is defeated in the US presidential election, which would be a major blow to Howard's own chances.

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