

# Canberra tightens its hold over the Pacific Islands Forum

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Australian Prime Minister John Howard used the annual meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), held in Samoa in early August, to tighten Canberra's grip over the tiny island states of the region. In the name of "good governance", he pushed ahead with an agenda of "reforms" aimed at opening up these economies to foreign investment and placing key sectors, including finance and policing, under the supervision, if not direct control, of Australian officials.

The meeting's most notable feature was the lack of any opposition from Pacific Island leaders. Howard reiterated a declaration made at the time of the Australian-led military intervention in the Solomon Islands in July 2003 that the South West Pacific was "our patch". "I believe very strongly that this is our region," he told the media last week. "We have a special responsibility in this part of the world."

At last year's Forum in New Zealand, Howard provoked controversy when he threw his weight around, insisting that an Australian official, Greg Urwin, take over as secretary general for the first time. This year all, even muted, criticism was dropped. Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare, who reacted angrily to Howard's previous statements that aid would depend on "good governance", declared that Pacific countries were very supportive of Australia's new role.

Samoa Prime Minister Tuilaepa admitted that some people had accused Australia and New Zealand of forcing things on Pacific Island states, but went on to say "we have a good thing going". In return for signing up to Canberra's "Pacific Plan", the PIF leaders are desperately hoping that the limited economic aid, on which they heavily depend, will continue to flow.

Urwin's power has been considerably enhanced over the past year. A special meeting of the Forum in Auckland in April approved an expanded role for the secretary general, giving him the power to call special meetings in

response to regional security "crises". The threat of the island countries becoming "failed states" and bases for "terrorism" and "criminal activity" is one of Canberra's pretexts for its aggressive intervention in the Pacific.

At the Post Forum Dialogue held after the meeting, US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly threw Washington's weight behind Australian intervention in the region. In comments to the media, he praised "Australian leadership" on the Solomons as an example of "a tough problem that was forthrightly addressed". "This is a kind of leadership and this is the South Pacific. Australia's the biggest inhabitant here and Prime Minister Howard is hard at work on it."

Kelly echoed Canberra's concerns about "security problems" in the Pacific, referring vaguely to the danger that alleged terrorist organisations such as Jemaah Islamiah could be active in the region. "There are bad people who look for places that they think are soft targets. Some of it relates to terror. Some of it relates to financing issues." Like the Howard government, however, Kelly produced no evidence whatsoever that terrorist groups were active in any Pacific countries. An unnamed US official conceded in comments to the *Age* newspaper that "so far the United States has seen no indication of Jemaah Islamiah doing anything in the Pacific."

A key focus of the Forum was the need for tougher laws and policing to make the Pacific a safe investment platform. A special airport safety unit staffed by eight Australian experts is to be established in Vanuatu. The 2004-2005 AusAID plan released in May outlined a Pacific Regional Policing Initiative with funding of \$A17 million and \$NZ2.5 million over five years to train 900 officers per year for the region's police forces. By centralising police training, Canberra is seeking to exercise broad influence over security forces in the Pacific countries, many of which have no military.

A broader "Pacific Plan"—aimed at closer regional

economic integration under Australian and New Zealand tutelage—is to be finalised for next year’s meeting. Howard bluntly outlined its purpose: “There’s ... a recognition that good governance is crucial to attracting investment, that’s a view that Australia has pushed, and there’s also an understanding that we do tie governance to aid and that it is reasonable because the Australian taxpayer is entitled to a good return for their investment.”

None of the island states are in a position to object. The *New Zealand Herald* commented: “In drafting its Pacific Plan, there is no getting around Australia’s utter dominance of the region. And no matter how uncomfortable that makes the smaller states feel, unless they hitch their futures to another region such as Asia, there is virtually nothing they can do about it.”

Canberra is pressing ahead with aspects of the economic restructuring agenda. It will provide \$6 million under the Pacific Governance Support Program to place additional Australian public servants in Pacific Island bureaucracies. Over the past year, Canberra has installed Australian officials in top posts as part of its Solomon Islands intervention and is preparing to do the same in Papua New Guinea under its “enhanced cooperation package”. Australian officials already hold key legal and police posts in Fiji.

Under a regional transport plan, Australia has provided \$2 million for a Pacific Regional Transport Study aimed at rationalising airlines and shipping. According to the *Age* newspaper, the plan, which has not been released, recommends that “wherever possible, the government-owned airlines should be corporatised and form alliances with larger carriers.” The proposal would rapidly lead to the dominance of Qantas or Air New Zealand over regional routes.

Nauru, which is technically bankrupt, is the starkest example of the economic crisis confronting the region. The island has a population of around 10,000 and is largely a barren wasteland following decades of having its phosphate reserves plundered. Most of the property owned by the Nauru Phosphate Royalties Trust has been handed over to receivers after Nauru failed to re-finance a \$230 million loan. Nauruans are totally dependent on the trust fund for basic necessities, including food.

Nauru’s leaders could not use Air Nauru planes to get to the Forum as its planes were grounded due to financial disputes. Foreign and Finance Minister David Adeang described the situation: “We have people in Nauru who are going hungry.... Our economy has virtually dried up all its sources of cash flow and our economy is so

dependent on imported foodstuffs, given our lack of capacity to grow our own food and return to a subsistence livelihood.”

Left with little alternative, Nauru formally requested assistance from the Forum, which assigned Urwin to work with the Nauruan government as a matter of “high priority”. No specific measures were outlined and not one extra cent was forthcoming from either Australia or New Zealand to deal with the crisis. Canberra signed an agreement with Nauru in March to provide \$13.5 million in extra funds in return for it continuing to run a prison camp for detained refugees on the island. Under the arrangement, an Australian official was to take over as Secretary of Finance and Australian Federal Police were to go to the island.

The plight of Nauru underscores the hypocritical character of Howard’s humanitarian posturing. “We’re here as a friend. We’re not here to throw our weight around,” he repeatedly told the media at the Forum. But apart from a pittance in aid for Niue, a tiny Pacific Island state that was ravaged by a cyclone in January, Australia and New Zealand offered no assistance to deal with the deepening social problems confronting the region.

The Forum communiqué referred to the HIV/AIDS epidemic striking the region, declaring it an “urgent” issue that had to be “vigorously” addressed. But no money was allocated for research or much needed specialist health care. Papua New Guinea has the highest reported rate of infection in the Pacific. A recent study forecast that the country’s labour force would reduce by one-third by 2020 due to HIV/AIDS.

Canberra’s determination to intervene more directly in the Pacific is motivated by heightened inter-imperialist rivalry within the region. Having secured Washington’s backing through its commitment of Australian troops to the US invasion of Iraq, the Howard government is aggressively shoring up Australian economic and security interests closer to home.



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