Australian election announced: a campaign of lies and provocation

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As the leader of a government which, to a historically unprecedented degree has been based on lies, media manipulation, provocations and scare campaigns, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has clearly decided that his best chance of scrambling back into office is even more of the same.

That is the only conclusion to be drawn from his statement that the election to be called for October 9 is about "trust."

By announcing the decision last Sunday, Howard ensured that the election campaign would last for six weeks—the longest since the elections of 1984. However, the purpose of the long campaign is not to ensure maximum scrutiny of the government's record—just the reverse.

By proroguing the House of Representatives, Howard hoped to avoid questions over his role in the "children overboard" affair, which played such a key role in the Liberal Party's campaign in the last election in November 2001.

The claims that asylum seekers threw their children overboard in a bid to gain entry into Australia as refugees were exposed on the eve of polling day in November 2001. But throughout the past three years Howard has maintained that he acted on "advice" when he insisted in his last major press conference of the campaign that the allegations were true. Howard's assertions were finally exposed on August 16 when Mike Scrafton, who was serving as an adviser to Defence Minister Peter Reith at the time of the election, revealed that he had personally told Howard, prior to the election, that the claims were untrue.

But in the end, Howard had no great cause for alarm. For just as he acted according to the modus operandi that has characterised his government, so did the Labor Party opposition. Having refused to subpoena Scrafton in an earlier inquiry by the Senate on the "children overboard" affair, the Labor Party decided to hold a one-day inquiry—to hear Scrafton's testimony—before issuing a final report on November 24, well after election day.

Labor leader Mark Latham's remarks in response to Howard's decision and the subsequent press conference were an even more striking expression of the same process.

It is now clear that, according to the legal standards used to prosecute the Nazis for planning and executing a war of aggression, Howard and his ministers are war criminals because of their collaboration in the US-led war against Iraq and the continuing occupation of the country.

Yet the war did not rate a mention in Latham's initial statement on the election. And in the 4,500-word transcript of the press conference, the word "Iraq" appears only once, and then only as part of remarks by Latham to the effect that Labor will be stronger on national security than the Howard government.

This is an illustration of one of the most striking features of the present-day political landscape in Australia and elsewhere. Millions of people are deeply opposed to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, but their anger and hostility can find no outlet in the official political apparatus.

Latham's failure to even mention the war was not accidental. It reflected the essential unity between the government and the Labor Party. Prior to the war, the Labor Party's only difference with Howard was that the invasion should have been carried out with the sanction of the United Nations. A year and a half on, notwithstanding Latham's rhetoric about "troops out by Christmas", the Labor Party is committed to maintaining Australian naval forces in the Gulf region

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and has made clear that it will join other US-led military actions in the so-called "war on terror" should it be returned to government.

As far as the issue of "trust" was concerned, the harshest condemnation of the Howard government's lies and falsifications offered by Latham was that the prime minister had refused to "bring the Australian people into his trust" and let them know when he planned to hand over to his deputy Peter Costello.

If his opening statement is anything to go by, Howard has decided to extend the big lie technique from war to the economy. He warned that if interest rates were to rise to the average of what they were under previous Labor governments then the average home mortgage repayment would jump by $960 a month. On the other hand, he said the government would shortly be announcing its plans to meet the challenges of the next 10 years, which will come off "the base of the most strongly performing economy in the Western world." The great achievement of his government was that "we have delivered a strong, robust and competitive economy."

But the real foundation of the Howard government's much vaunted boom is not its economic policies. Rather, it is the expansion of debt since the middle of the 1990s. According to an article by ANU economics professor Ross Garnaut published in the July 29 edition of the *Australian*: "Private consumption spending has been driven by one of the strongest sustained real expansions of bank lending."

So rapid has been the increase in debt that the savings share of household income was minus three percent in the March quarter of this year. Another symptom of the debt-fuelled expansion is the growth of the current account deficit to near record levels as a percentage of gross domestic product, despite record terms of trade (measuring the ratio of export to import prices) and historically low international interest rates.

The increase in debt has fuelled a boom in house prices, which means that even though interest rates are at their lowest levels for about 30 years, home buyers are repaying as much as during the late 1980s when they were around 17 percent. Even a very small increase in rates—and the Reserve Bank has indicated that a rise is in the pipeline whatever party is returned in the election—could have a very severe impact.

As the campaign got under way opinion polls indicated that while the government was ahead on the primary vote, the Labor Party would win government after the distribution of preferences from the Greens and other minor parties.

If this trend continues, the Howard government is certain to reach into its bag of dirty tricks in order to try to hold on to power. Other forces may take a hand as well. With the presidential election set for November 2, the Bush administration will regard the defeat of Howard as a setback, particularly after the loss of its Spanish ally in March.

The possibility of a provocation is clearly in the air. On the very first day of campaigning, Treasurer Peter Costello claimed that a Madrid-style terrorist attack could be used to disrupt the election. "The only thing you can say is this: in Spain, during an election, there was a terrorist incident, so we have to be careful in Australia," he told a radio interviewer in Melbourne.

Later, however, he was forced to concede that he was not aware of any intelligence pointing to an attack and that the threat level had not been raised. But Costello's attempt to start a scare campaign will not be the last. As the Wellington-based *Dominion Post* noted in a perceptive comment on Monday, if, for example, an Australian were taken hostage in Iraq during the course of the campaign, then "all bets" would be off.

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