

The Governor-General's speech: a wish list for Australia's corporate elite

Terry Cook

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The speech delivered by Australian Governor-General Major General Michael Jeffery opening the 41st federal parliament on November 16 set the agenda for the fourth-term Howard Coalition government. Written for Jeffery by the prime minister's department, it makes clear that the reelection of Howard—with a majority in both the lower house and the Senate—will see an even further move to the right and a renewed drive to legislate reactionary measures the government failed to get through in the past.

The speech opened with the declaration: "Few nations can claim the special gift that providence has bestowed on this country—as a beacon of democracy and tolerance underpinned by a prosperous economy and a fair society." The agenda outlined, however, has nothing to do with promoting democracy, tolerance or fairness. It amounts to a virtual hit-list for the corporate elite on social conditions, welfare and democratic rights at home and for the pursuit of Australia's colonial ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region.

According to the Governor-General, the government will:

- * "accelerate the reform of workplace relations" as a "means of raising productivity".

- * The greater levels of productivity will be delivered by intensifying the exploitation of labour in the workplace. The number of allowable conditions for inclusion in work agreements will be reduced and there will be fewer restrictions on the use of contract labour by employers. Small businesses with fewer than 20 employees will be exempted from the present minimal "unfair dismissal laws", allowing them to sack workers at will and avoid paying severance entitlements.

To assist employers in imposing these measures, the government will legislate for compulsory secret ballots as a pre-condition for strikes, including so-called "protected" industrial action currently allowed during the negotiating period for new enterprise work agreements. The Trades Practices Act will be strengthened to outlaw all sympathy strikes or industrial action for any matters outside of those being negotiated in relation to a specific enterprise agreement.

- * "break the tragic cycle of welfare dependency" and "lift labour force participation" by applying an "appropriate balance of obligations, incentives and assistance".

- * Social security and welfare recipients—including those on a disability allowance—will be subjected to even greater levels of scrutiny, with the aim of driving them off benefits altogether and into low-paying jobs.

The extent of the new punitive regime can be gauged from the fact that, during the first four years of the Howard government, the number of breaches of social security recipients increased by a factor of 5.6 times. In one year, 1998-99, some 300,000 people were breached (i.e., had their benefits suspended or cut-off altogether).

Another indication is the recently leaked cabinet document outlining new measures to intensively monitor and control unemployed, disabled and other welfare recipients in Aboriginal communities. "Work for the dole" and other "mutual obligation" programs will be extended, requiring individuals, families and, in some cases, entire communities, to engage in a range of menial work activities just to qualify for government assistance.

- * introduce a "Mature Age Worker Tax Offset" to "make it financially attractive for older Australians to remain in employment on a full-time, part-time or casual basis". The government will "work with industry to counter the misplaced prejudices against the employment of mature aged workers.

- * The government is intent on driving up the retirement age and doing away as much as possible with the old aged pension system. The system, which once guaranteed an aged pension to men on reaching 65 years and women at 60—has been continuously eroded via the introduction of means testing, enforced superannuation and increases in the age of retirement for women.

The speech ominously referred to "the increasing pressure on the health and welfare sectors" of an "ageing of Australia's population".

- * deliver tax reforms outlined during the election campaign, to be delivered by July next year.

- * The changes will see the top tax rate lifted from \$70,000 to \$80,000 and the cut-off for the 30 percent tax bracket lifted from \$58,000 to \$63,000. The tax reform will see the less well off—those whose annual income is below \$58,000, and the seriously poor, on \$30,000 and less—receive nothing.

Big business, however, is already demanding bigger handouts and further benefits. Even as Jeffery delivered the speech, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry called on the government to increase the top tax threshold to \$100,000 and reduce the top two tax rates from 42 and 47 cents in the dollar to just 30 cents.

- * maintain "its commitment to reform Australia's media ownership laws. New arrangements will provide enhanced diversity and increased investment...."

- * In line with the demands of the giant media conglomerates, regulatory measures restricting monopoly control over media outlets, newspapers, radio and television will be jettisoned.

- * "pursue its longstanding policy for the full privatisation of Telstra".

- * Legislation will be put into place allowing the government to offload its remaining 50.1 percent share in the national telecommunications carrier at a time of its choosing. A reference in the speech to the sale being "contingent on adequate telecommunications service levels" is a nothing but a carrot to

Howard's National Party coalition partner and to nervous government backbenchers.

The proposed Telstra sale has fueled deep-going opposition among the National Party's rural and regional constituents, who rightly fear that full privatisation, along with the abandonment of the present system of cross-subsidisation of service provision to more remote regions, will see service levels plummet or service provision cease altogether.

Hand in hand with its deepening attacks on social conditions, the government intends to further undermine democratic rights, with greater levels of surveillance and the increased invasion of privacy.

"To take account of new security threats," the speech declares, "the government will bring forward legislation that will facilitate expeditious access to stored communications, such as email, and establish a comprehensive surveillance devices regime for the investigation of serious Commonwealth offences."

While the right to privacy of ordinary Australians is being torn apart, the speech promises new measures to "protect sensitive national security information". In other words, the various secret service agencies and the government itself will be even less accountable.

Nowhere in the speech is there any explanation of the "new security threats" that supposedly justify the further strengthening of the already draconian legislation passed since 2001 giving sweeping powers to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). These allow ASIO to detain and question people without charge or trial, to strip-search people and hold them incommunicado, effectively for an indefinite period.

Turning to foreign policy, Jeffrey declares: "The government will maintain a strong stand against international terrorism and the threat of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It will also respond to the adverse impact that failing states have on our national security."

It should be remembered that the Howard government used the lie that Saddam Hussein's regime had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction to join the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq. The alleged "threat of proliferation" is the pretext for joining Washington's threatening stance against North Korea.

As for the supposed danger posed by so-called "failing nation states", this was Howard's excuse for a military-police incursion into the Solomon Islands earlier this year to reduce the tiny Pacific nation to little more than an Australian protectorate. This followed Australia's participation in the UN intervention into East Timor in 1999, not for humanitarian reasons, but to secure Australian control over the substantial oil and natural gas reserves under the Timor Sea.

Canberra has already declared the mineral-rich Papua New Guinea (PNG) a "failing state," and earlier this year dispatched 230 Australian police under the Enhanced Cooperation Program (ECP) to take up top posts in the PNG police force, courts, financial and planning agencies, customs and civil aviation. Only last week, Australia's Foreign Minister Alexander Downer threatened to suspend millions of dollars in aid to Vanuatu unless the tiny South Pacific nation "improved governance and accepted the presence of Australian police and advisers".

Declaring the "government will provide the Australian Defence Force with the major new equipment it needs to carry out the vital role of defending Australians at home and Australian interests abroad" and to keep forces "in Iraq, the Solomon Islands and Timor until the job is done" the speech outlines in detail increased spending on military hardware.

This includes an outlay of \$50 billion over the next decade for new Abram tanks, additional troop lift helicopters, Tiger Armed Reconnaissance Helicopters and a new fleet of Armidale Class Patrol Boats. About \$8 billion will be spent on the construction of Air Warfare Destroyers and Amphibious Ships.

To increase Australia's presence in the Asia-Pacific region, the government will "establish six new Australian Federal Police counter-terrorist teams" to enhance "surveillance and investigative capability and for rapid deployment". While maintaining that the teams will "work with regional neighbours", the measure is clearly in line with Howard's declaration this year that he would countenance direct intervention by Australian forces in any country—without invitation—on the grounds of a "perceived" terror threat to Australia.

This extensive military buildup is not solely for use overseas. The government is systematically strengthening the state apparatus—including the military and secret police agencies—in anticipation of the development of mass opposition to militarism and its offensive on social conditions and basic rights.

The Labor Opposition's response to the Governor-General's speech was entirely predictable. While mouthing nominal concerns about some of the impending legislation, Labor intends to rule out any serious campaign against it, prostrate itself before Howard's so-called mandate and establish a new level of bi-partisanship with the government.

This is the meaning of Labor leader Mark Latham's statement to the Nine Network on November 20, in which he declared that, while he would not "break very firm commitments made in the election"—to oppose the sale of Telstra, further deregulation of industrial relations and the scrapping of cross-media ownership—he "did not want the Labor party to be seen as spoilers...so it's a balance". It is worth noting that the Labor parliamentary caucus meeting at the beginning of November announced a "review" of the party's election policies, including its so-called "very firm commitments".



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