

The Howard government, the Australian media and the Schapelle Corby case

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The official response to the plight of 27-year-old Schapelle Corby is a revealing exposure of the debased character of political life in Australia.

Corby was found guilty by an Indonesian court on May 27 for attempting to smuggle 4.1 kilograms of marijuana into Bali last year and sentenced to a 20-year jail term. She claims to be the victim of a bungled operation by drug smugglers in Australia who placed the marijuana in her unlocked surfboard bag.

Whether this is true or not is difficult to assess on the existing evidence but irregularities in the police investigation and the trial provide grounds for “reasonable doubt” about the verdict. Innocent or guilty, the 20-year jail term is a travesty and will see the best years of this young woman’s life wasted behind bars.

While drug smuggling arrests are generally given little publicity within Australia, this case rapidly captured the public imagination. Thousands of tourists, particularly young Australians, visit Bali every year, so for many, Corby, who had no prior criminal record or association with drugs, could have been a sister, daughter or girlfriend.

Anxious to capitalise on these legitimate concerns, the Australian media quickly moved to sensationalise her plight and use it to boost newspaper sales, network ratings and advertising revenues.

Scores of newspaper and television reporters, camera crews and commentators were assigned to follow every twist in the case, pry into her life and family background, and establish a reality-TV style ‘debate’ about her innocence or guilt. Not surprisingly, no serious insights were produced. Instead, Corby and her family were either scandalised or glorified, depending on the media outlet’s particular angle.

The Australian media in full flight is truly a disgusting spectacle. Gossip magazine superficiality and arrogance cheerfully rub shoulders with xenophobia and outright racism. Alan Jones, a prominent Sydney radio talkback announcer, for example, denounced the court for not conducting its proceedings in English. Attempting to whip up anti-Indonesian bigotry, another commentator ranted that the Indonesian judiciary was “straight out of the trees”.

An op-ed piece on May 29 by Miranda Devine, a right-wing columnist for the Sydney-based, *Sun Herald*, typified some of the “sensitive” media coverage on offer.

“The Australian public,” she declared, “has seen what Corby’s defence team saw long ago: a transcendent grace that makes her

guilt implausible. Her strength of character, not to mention the careful styling and stunning good looks, improved in recent months by jail-time weight loss, have bolstered her claim she is innocent and that corrupt baggage handlers planted the drugs in her boogie board bag.”

The wall-to-wall media coverage was matched only by the grubby machinations of numerous entrepreneurs offering their “services”. Ron Bakir, a Queensland mobile phone vendor with a dubious record of failed businesses, proclaimed himself Corby’s “white knight”. Bakir, who is attempting to secure a \$200,000 book publishing deal, recently registered a company, Schapelle Corby Pty Ltd, in which he is the sole director, secretary and shareholder.

Celebrity agent and promoter Harry M. Miller is also said to be negotiating a deal. And early this week a Melbourne entrepreneur registered the young woman’s name as a luggage brand—the Corby Case. He claimed it would be used to assist the Corby family but admitted that he made no attempt to contact the family before registering the brand name.

By contrast, the Howard government and other sections of the media, including Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper and the Fairfax-owned *Australian Financial Review*, have attempted to downplay the case.

Their motivation is the overriding determination of Australia’s ruling elite to maintain close relations with the new Indonesian government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and particularly the military and police. With enormous resources being devoted to this ongoing project, nothing can be allowed to impede its progress.

Prime Minister Howard was no doubt initially relieved that the media hysteria over Corby helped divert attention from various recent government initiatives—including windfall tax benefits to the rich, and savage new industrial relations laws that attack jobs, wages and basic democratic rights. But as sympathy for Corby developed into a political phenomenon—created, in large part by the tabloid media and extreme right wing elements—Howard, who had initially ignored the case, realised it could escalate out of control and that he had to act.

Howard responded by feigning concern and offering limited assistance. This “support” was qualified by the insistence that there should be no criticism of the Indonesian government, legal authorities or police.

Australian officials were also directed to whitewash the endemic

corruption of the Indonesian state apparatus and downplay politically embarrassing and escalating revelations, including from former police officers, customs officials and airport staff, that drug-smuggling gangs were operating in Australian airports.

Australian Federal Police (AFP) commissioner Mick Keelty, went so far as to tell the media, while Corby's trial was underway, that her defence lawyers' claims that she was the victim of a bungled drug trafficking operation were "flimsy". "There is very little intelligence," he declared, "to suggest that baggage handlers are using innocent people to traffic heroin or other drugs between states".

Keelty's intervention, along with revelations that the AFP had collaborated with Indonesian police in allowing nine young Australian "drug mules" to be arrested in Bali, where they now face the prospect of death sentences, further inflamed Corby supporters. The information used to arrest the nine was supplied by the AFP, which could have arrested them before they left Australia or waited until they returned.

As the Corby trial concluded and the three-judge panel prepared its ruling, popular interest in the case reached unprecedented levels. On May 27, the Bali court verdict was broadcast live on Australian television and watched by over 750,000 people, a high number by Australian standards, particularly since it was screened in the middle of the day, during normal working hours.

Acutely nervous about the reaction, Howard immediately called a press conference to offer his "sympathy" to Corby and her family and announce that the government would provide two QCs to assist with a legal appeal. He insisted, however, that Australians had to "recognise and respect" the Bali court ruling. "[A]t the end of the day," he said, "we must, and the Government will, respect the processes of the justice system of other countries."

Howard's anxious and patently hypocritical comments—after all, Australia is part of the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq and insists on the "right" to launch "first strike" pre-emptive military action against so-called terrorists in South East Asia—were quickly supported by the *Australian Financial Review*.

Speaking for the most powerful sections of Australian business, the newspaper editorialised on May 30 that "democracy had triumphed" with the Indonesian elections last year and that nothing must threaten the "highly valuable but sensitive joint operations with our Indonesian neighbours against terrorism, people-smuggling, illicit drugs and other mutual threats".

Geoffrey Barker, the paper's foreign editor, was even blunter. "The great wailing and lamentation over Schapelle Corby's trial and 20-year prison sentence," he wrote, "is unwarranted, counterproductive and potentially damaging to long-term Australian regional interests... Corby has fallen foul of tough anti-drug laws about which every Australian traveller is fully informed. Her ordeal should now be allowed to unfold without a chorus of populist hysteria."

Similar comments appeared in the *Australian* newspaper and other Murdoch publications. Right-wing demagogue Andrew Bolt, writing for the *Herald Sun*, branded Corby supporters as "the beast of mob rule".

Naturally enough, these denunciations simply added fuel to the fire. Having been whipped up by right-wing populists, Corby

supporters began sending letters to the press, demanding a tourist boycott of Indonesia, the return of tsunami aid sent by Australians to Indonesian victims, and similar reactionary demands.

When concerned comments appeared in the Indonesian press, including from the influential *Jakarta Post*, the political alarm bells began ringing in Howard's office. Something had to be done to pull the rug out from under the Corby movement.

Last Wednesday, the opportunity presented itself. An envelope containing white particles and a threatening note was sent to the Indonesian embassy in Canberra. Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, immediately declared publicly, without a shred of evidence, that it was probably anthrax and blamed the alleged terrorist attack on Corby supporters.

"I'm staggered that this has happened but I am afraid that there is a dark corner in every country," Howard declared on Australian television and radio. Downer appeared in paid advertisements on Indonesian television to offer an unqualified apology and the Australian media went into overdrive, uncritically circulating the government's allegations.

Twenty-four hours later, police revealed that the powder was not anthrax but a harmless substance. The message text, which was written in Indonesian and reportedly made no mention of Corby, has still not been released. Nor has the government provided any evidence linking it to Corby supporters.

Moreover, on Saturday it was revealed that over 360 white-powder envelopes have been sent within Australia since September 11, 2001. Notwithstanding the cowardly and reactionary nature of these hoaxes, the Howard government has refrained from labelling any of them as terrorist attacks.

While one commentator correctly described the hysterical reaction to the white-powder letters as "Machiavellian", the Murdoch media moved in to defend the government.

Speaking on the ABC-TV's "Insiders" program on Sunday, Paul Kelly, a senior columnist for the *Australian*, admitted that Howard and Downer had "overreacted" to the white powder letter. But their response, Kelly opined, was "calculated" and "necessary" to reassure Jakarta and "deliver a dose of shock therapy to public sentiment and public debate in this country".

In other words, when in trouble, use accusations of "terrorism" to whip the population into line.

Howard now feigns "concern" about the "dark corner" of Australian politics, but his political career has been built on cultivating just such elements. While he may have temporarily succeeded in puncturing the Corby phenomenon, his government's ability to prosecute its foreign and domestic agenda by intimidating the population with the spectre of terrorism is definitely wearing thin.



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