

After the London bombings:

Australian prime minister advocates further attacks on civil liberties

James Cogan
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In the wake of the London bombings on July 7, Australian Prime Minister John Howard exploited 12 days of state visits to the US, Britain and Iraq to align his government even more closely with the occupation of Iraq and to advocate menacing new inroads into the civil liberties of the Australian people.

Upon arriving in Washington on July 16, Howard was feted by the Bush administration. Over the course of four days, he held meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, culminating with a press conference and “family lunch” with George Bush at the White House.

As other US “allies” have withdrawn forces from Iraq or announced deadlines, the Australian government has been one of the few to deploy more. In February, an additional 450 troops were dispatched to Iraq, boosting the number of Australian personnel taking part in the occupation to close to 1,400. Last month, Howard announced that 150 more will be sent in September to join US forces in Afghanistan.

At a press conference with Bush on July 19, Howard echoed the Orwellian propaganda that US imperialism and its allies have occupied strategic and oil-rich regions of the globe, and killed tens of thousands of Afghans and Iraqis, in order to spread “liberty” and “freedom”. No mention was made of “weapons of mass destruction”—the lie used to justify the illegal invasion of Iraq.

The endorsement of US foreign policy won Howard hymns of praise in Washington. Bush described him as a “man of conviction”, who had “backbone” and was not afraid to “make the hard decisions”. The Australian prime minister repaid the tributes by declaring the Iraq deployment was an open-ended commitment he was “not going to try to put a time limit on”.

Howard’s backing for the US-led occupations constitutes an ongoing provocation against the Australian people. Any involvement in the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq was opposed by a clear majority of the population, while opinion polls in February registered two-thirds opposition to the dispatch of any more troops to Iraq. In the course of last year’s election, Howard downplayed any suggestion of the deployment of additional forces, only to do precisely that once his government was re-elected.

Just as Blair bears political responsibility for the London attacks, Howard’s justifications for the illegal invasion of Iraq have placed Australians at far greater risk. His government has defined itself internationally as one of the most consistent and vocal supporters of the militarist agenda of the Bush White House. He will therefore bear direct responsibility for any terrorist atrocity targeting Australian

civilians.

The prime minister arrived in Britain on July 20 and, keen to make political mileage from the London bombings, quickly paid a visit to Australian victim Louise Barry in her hospital bed. Barry had clearly drawn the conclusion, along with millions of other people around the world, that there was a direct connection between the terror attack in London and the occupation of Iraq. “Do you reckon,” she asked Howard, “because everyone says it’s all about, because of, the Iraq war. Do you reckon?”

The unexpected question clearly unnerved Howard. Stumbling about for an answer, he responded: “No I don’t... different people have different views but I don’t... I mean, they had a go at us and they had a go at other people before Iraq started.”

The denial of the undeniable connection, however, was one of the main themes of the joint press conference by Blair and Howard on July 21. The conference coincided with initial reports of the failed attempts by suicide bombers to carry out a second attack on London’s rail network. Howard came forward to lend his voice to Blair’s efforts to reject there was any link between the Iraq war and the targeting of British civilians by terrorists.

The United States, Britain and Australia, he declared, were targets of “terrorism”, not because of the actions of their governments, but because of Islamic extremist “hatred of a way of life”.

Howard invoked the Bali bombings in 2002 as evidence that terrorist attacks predated the Iraq war and stemmed from a “perverted ideology”. The example, though, simply underscores that terrorism has been fueled by the escalating neo-colonial incursions undertaken by US imperialism since the first war on Iraq in 1991. The motive of the Indonesian-based terrorists who murdered 188 people in Bali—including 88 Australians—was revenge for the deployment of an Australian-led UN force in 1999, with US military and diplomatic support, to occupy East Timor.

Howard repeated the cynical claim that the invasion of East Timor was aimed at “liberating” the population. The real aim was to install a so-called “independent” government that would function as a puppet regime for Canberra. While the Timorese masses continue to endure among the lowest living standards in the world, agreements have been signed that hand over the bulk of the lucrative oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea to Australian control.

The very terrorist threat that the policies of his government has created was seized upon by Howard in London to advocate sweeping new attacks on democratic rights in Australia and divert any genuine political debate into hysteria about terrorists.

At his press conference with Blair, Howard foreshadowed moves by his government to duplicate the draconian “anti-terrorism” legislation being prepared by the British government. “We are carrying out an examination at the moment of the need to change and strengthen our laws against terrorist activity, or potential terrorist activity,” he declared. “We will include in that examination the sort of changes that have been contemplated here in Britain.”

These include the creation of laws that are so vague they could be used to persecute a wide range of dissenting views and political opposition. One law would illegalise “indirect incitement to terrorism”. Another would make it a crime to “endorse” suicide bombings or terrorism. Other legislation being considered by Blair includes the right to detain “terrorist” suspects for up to three months without charges.

The existing laws in Australia, Howard stated, were “19th century legal responses to potentially 21st century technological terrorist capacity”. He specifically referred to technologies such as the Internet, mobile phones and SMS text messages, hinting at greater police powers to monitor the communications of private citizens. Howard stressed on several occasions his admiration for the pervasive closed circuit TV (CCTV) surveillance systems that the British state uses to record public movements.

Howard has also voiced his support for a national identity card system that databases information on every citizen—a measure that was overwhelmingly opposed as an ominous affront to democratic rights when it was proposed in 1987 by the Labor Party government. Before leaving Australia, he told the media that an ID card was an “issue that should be back on table as part of inevitably looking at everything in the wake of something like the terrible tragedy in London”.

In his final gesture of support for the Iraq occupation, Howard made a secret visit to Baghdad to July 25 on his way back to Australia. His trip served only to underscore the quagmire in that country. Due to fears of a resistance attack, helicopters flying at high speed were used to transport the prime minister over the 10 kilometres between Baghdad airport and the heavily-guarded city centre, where he held a 45-minute meeting with the head of the US-backed regime, Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. As they met, a US military report was leaked in the international press claiming that the Iraqi government’s army and police were dysfunctional and thoroughly infiltrated by insurgents fighting against the occupation. The city was rocked with multiple explosions throughout the day.

A helmeted and flak-jacketed Howard was then flown to a base in southern Iraq for a photo opportunity with Australian troops. Predictably, journalists were given no opportunity to ask the soldiers what they thought of Howard’s indefinite commitment of Australian forces to the occupation.

Howard’s unequivocal support for the Bush administration and his threats against democratic rights have been broadly backed within the political establishment.

The Labor Party opposition has greeted every pronouncement with agreement or attempts to outdo Howard’s calls for police-state measures. Federal Labor leader Kim Beazley has made the demand for a “Ministry of Homeland Security” and greater surveillance at railway stations, airports and ports the focus of his public statements over recent days. When directly asked by a journalist last week if Australia should withdraw from Iraq, as “most argue it is the creation of the threat”, Beazley replied: “No, it’s broader than that.”

The television and print media has functioned as little more than a propaganda agency for the government, sowing fear and suspicion of

Australia’s Muslim community. Islamic bookstores have been raided and allegations made in the press of extremist groups operating in Sydney’s suburbs.

The media lined up completely behind Howard’s attacks on Melbourne-based cleric Mohammed Omran over the latter’s remarks that the US government had a hand in the London bombings and that he did not believe Osama bin Laden or Muslims were responsible for the September 11, 2001 terror attacks in the United States. Omran stated that he believed they were organised by the US government in order to create a pretext for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Omran’s views are his own, but there are more than enough questions surrounding September 11 to leave credible suspicions that US intelligence agencies had prior knowledge that an attack was being prepared. In the new climate descending on Australia, however, raising any question marks about the official government version is, as Howard declared, “unacceptable”.

Hounded by the government and in the press as an apologist for terrorism, Omran was ultimately forced into a public retraction of his comments during an interview on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Lateline” current affairs program.

The hysteria against Muslims has progressed from demands for “assimilation”, to calls for immigration controls and deportations, and even suggestions of stripping people of their citizenship on the basis of their views.

Leading liberal commentator Terry Lane used an opinion piece in the *Melbourne Age* on July 17 to denounce “multiculturalism”—or the acceptance of diverse ethnic and religious communities in Australia from the right. “Australians,” Lane asserted, “are by nature assimilationist and we are right to be so. Here’s the deal, we say. You can come here and enjoy the benefits of living in this society but you must acknowledge that the peace, prosperity and equality of opportunity here are not lucky accidents—they are products of our culture.”

Lane’s comment provided the opening for the *Australian* to publish a diatribe of hate on July 22 by right-wing former National Party senator John Stone. Stone demanded that Australia “sharply reduce, indeed virtually halt, Muslim immigration flow” and impose strict English-language and “cultural” requirements on all potential immigrants.

The following day, the *Australian* editorial declared: “It is the intellectual equivalent of treason to exonerate, let alone celebrate, terrorist attacks that kill Australians and others... This era of terror may be the time to assert the authority of Australian values that have served us well and suggest to anybody, migrant, or native-born, that if they don’t like it they can leave.”

Howard’s international tour and the response to it domestically must be taken as a sharp warning. An atmosphere is being generated where those who seek to expose the predatory motives of Australia’s imperialist foreign policy will increasingly face accusations of treason and of lining up with terrorists.



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