

# On orders from prime minister's department and police: Australian web site shut down

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One week before the third anniversary of the criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Australian government forced the closure of a satirical web site that powerfully exposed several key lies told by Prime Minister John Howard to justify participation in the US-led war.

Authored by Richard Neville, former editor of *Oz* magazine—a well-known satirical publication that challenged British censorship laws in the 1960s—the site—[johnhowardpm.org](http://johnhowardpm.org)—was suspended after a high-level intervention by the prime minister's department and the federal police.

The web site consisted of an “apology speech” from Howard in which the prime minister announces that he is reversing his support for the invasion of Iraq. It cites several Howard speeches, including an address to the Institute of Public Affairs in May 2004 when he claimed that hospitals, electricity, water, sewerage and other basic services were being restored to ordinary Iraqis. In the “speech”, the prime minister claims that he is now “a troubled citizen” and that all US-led forces should withdraw as soon as possible so that the Iraqi people can “regain control of their future”. Although the site remains blocked, the speech is now available as a pdf at “John Howard’s apology: reflections of the situation in Iraq”

Posted on March 13, the site received over 10,500 hits in a little over 24 hours before it encountered unexplained “technical difficulties”. Neville contacted Yahoo!, which maintained for several days that it was looking into “technical problems”. On March 16 he phoned Melbourne IT and one of its representatives admitted that Greg Williams from the People, Resources and Communication Division of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet had ordered the site’s domain name be suspended, effectively

shutting down the site.

Williams falsely claimed that the site looked like the prime minister’s own web site and therefore violated its property rights. Melbourne IT also admitted that the company had received three phone calls from the Australian Federal Police, including from the AFP’s Australian Hi-Tech Crime Centre.

Not surprisingly, Yahoo! has not objected to this violation of the right to free speech. Last year it provided the Chinese government with information that led to a 10-year jail term for a Chinese journalist who provided information to western news services about growing inequality in China. The multi-billion dollar corporation responded to protests over this action by declaring that it regularly responded to requests from police agencies for information, not just in China but in other countries as well. Yahoo! also has a long-standing agreement to censor Chinese language search engine and other services, in line with Beijing’s dictates.

Bruce Tonkin, Melbourne IT’s chief technology officer, later told the media that [johnhowardpm.org](http://johnhowardpm.org) looked like “a phishing site”—a bogus web site used to “fish” for Internet users’ financial information and passwords and therefore had to be taken down.

These claims are, of course, totally bogus. The site, which follows a long tradition of political satire and was registered in Neville’s name, was blocked not because it was “phishing” or violating intellectual property rights, but because it constituted an effective and politically embarrassing exposure of the Howard government and its lies.

No one from the police or government, the web hosting company Yahoo! or the domain name registration body Melbourne IT, bothered to contact Neville before his site was censored. Nor has he been provided with any written notification or explanation.

There appears to be no immediate or clear legal framework through which Neville can appeal against what has occurred—an Australian government bureaucrat can simply phone the domain name registration body and demand that the domain name be cancelled, thereby dismantling the site.

What has happened to Neville sets a dangerous precedent for the future. Using these police-state methods any political cartoonist, filmmaker, artist, writer or actor satirising a government politician can now be accused of copyright infringements and censored and/or prosecuted.

Government interference to take down the “Howard apology” site is the latest in an escalating assault on basis democratic rights. The government is acutely sensitive to any exposure of its political record and is attempting to suppress and marginalise all opposition to its participation in the illegal occupation of Iraq.

Over the past few years, with tactical support from the Labor Party, it has introduced a range of repressive measures, including the 1999 Online Services Act to control Internet content and last year’s repressive anti-terrorism and sedition legislation.

Under the new sedition laws any Internet site, film, broadcast or publication expressing sympathy or support for anyone opposing or resisting Australian military interventions overseas can be banned and its authors jailed for up to seven years. Organisations can also be outlawed and their members jailed for “urging disaffection” with the government. While Neville has not yet been charged with sedition, the government could move to do so at any time.

Richard Neville told the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday that he was deeply shocked by the suppression of his site. “It was like being struck on the head with a hammer when Melbourne IT told me that the site was taken down after phone calls from the prime minister’s department,” he said.

“For a prime minister’s secretary to be involved in this sort of thing is bizarre. What are they so paranoid about? In fact, I didn’t believe it and my first reaction was that I wanted it in writing. They told me they would do this but it still hasn’t happened.

“To suggest that I was trying to violate the property rights of the prime minister’s web site is ridiculous. Every link in the speech takes the reader to information contradicting everything Howard had said and still says

about Iraq.

“This is a complete violation of my basic rights and if it can happen to me it can happen to anyone. Anybody who believes this action was taken solely because of the similarity between the two sites may as well believe in fairies.”

Neville pointed to the Howard government’s repressive new sedition laws and said that Melbourne IT had obviously been placed under political pressure.

“I can’t pretend to know how this all works but the atmosphere these people are now operating in is one of paranoia. What would have happened to them if they had left the site up? After a phone call from the PM’s department and from three federal police I guess they got the message,” he said.



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