

Why Canada's Conservative government chose to celebrate Australia's John Howard

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Canada's new Conservative government accorded Australian Prime Minister John Howard the honor of being the first foreign head of government to visit Canada under its watch. That it did so speaks volumes about the Conservatives' intentions to shift Canada far to the right.

Howard is one of the closest allies of the Bush administration—Australia joined the US-led invasion of Iraq and still has 1400 troops there—and is the foreign leader who in his right-wing outlook and thuggish political modus operandi most resembles the current US president.

Before coming to Ottawa for a three-day visit late last week, Howard was feted at the White House with a state dinner. His reception in Ottawa was no less celebratory. The Australian prime minister was given the rare privilege of addressing parliament and used the occasion to lavishly praise US leadership in the contemporary world.

Although Canada and Australia share a British imperial past and are members of the Commonwealth, neither country has hitherto put much stock in their bilateral relations. Just how exceptional was the honor the Conservative government accorded Howard is underscored by the fact that he is just the second sitting Australian prime minister to make an official visit to Canada. The previous visit was made by John Curtin more than sixty years ago when Australia and Canada were important, albeit secondary, members of the World War Two Allied coalition.

During the campaign for last January's federal election, Prime Minister Stephen Harper sought to downplay his neo-conservative politics and the ties of his party to religious fundamentalists and the US Republican right. The corporate media faithfully parroted Haper's claims that the Conservatives are a

"moderate, mainstream party" and Harper's scathing dismissals of opposition charges of a "hidden" Conservative agenda as "scare-mongering."

But last week Harper took off his political mask. On Wednesday his government rammed through parliament a motion greatly expanding the Canadian Armed Forces' deployment to Afghanistan (See "In the face of mounting popular opposition—Canada dramatically escalates its military intervention in Afghanistan"). Then on Thursday, Harper rolled out the red carpet for Howard and led Conservative MPs in enthusiastically applauding an address in which the Australian prime minister unabashedly defended the Bush administration and the right of the US, Canada, Australia and other capitalist powers to mount invasions and occupations in the name of spreading freedom.

Howard and his Australian Liberal government have given unqualified support to the Bush administration in every stage of its purported world war on terror. And in return, his government has received Washington's backing for its own imperialist ambitions in the South Pacific, including the recent deployment of troops to the Solomon Islands and the sending of war ships to East Timor, and Australia's assertion of a right to take "pre-emptive" action against "terror" anywhere in south-east Asia.

Howard leads a government that thrives on social reaction. With little opposition from the Australian Labor Party, Howard has overseen the extension of the detaining of immigrants in mandatory detention centers. Recently, his government stripped back the rights of the Australian working class with the introduction of anti-union laws and launched a frontal assault on civil liberties with the passing of anti-terror laws in line with the Bush Administration's Patriot

Act.

Howard, it need be added, is notorious for making crude right-wing appeals, including efforts, akin to those of Bush, to instill a climate of fear in the population and whip up anti-immigrant sentiment.

Harper has modeled many of his policies and much of his political posturing after Howard, whom he met with in Washington last year. The Harper Conservatives reportedly studied Howard's first election win in 1996, and imported one of his key advisers, Australian Liberal Party director Brian Loughnane, to help them with crafting their platform and tactics for the last federal election.

More significantly, Canada's Conservatives and the right in general are envious of the close relationship that the Australian government has established with the Bush administration and the Australian government's frequent use of its military to promote the interests of Australian business globally, especially in the South Pacific region. Last year, the *National Post* devoted a series of articles bemoaning the fact that Australia has assumed the role of US partner that Canada should be playing.

A May 20th editorial in the *Globe & Mail* entitled "Howard's wise words" warmly praised his address to Canada's parliament and urged support for his call for Canada to cooperate even more closely with the Bush administration in world affairs—a shift the Harper government is already intent on effecting. Said the *Globe*: "The United States is Canada's neighbour, friend and ally, but it took an Australian prime minister to say what most Canadian leaders dare not: that the world should be grateful for the USA".

On the second day of Howard's visit, Harper and Howard held meetings at which they discussed making a joint demand to Washington that the US, in the name of nuclear non-proliferation, not establish a uranium exporting cartel without Canada and Australia, the world's two largest suppliers of uranium, having a major say. They also discussed the possibility that Canada will join Australia and the US in formally opposing the Kyoto Accord to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Canberra and Washington refused to sign the Kyoto agreement on climate change and instead have joined forces with several other states to form the "Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate," which will set non-binding emission targets.

Howard said his government would "warmly welcome" Canada's participation in the partnership.

Already the Conservatives have gutted the Environment Ministry programs that relate to Canada's Kyoto commitments. A leaked Conservative government memo says that Ottawa opposes any further emission-reduction targets being adopted under Kyoto's second phase, set to begin in 2012, and that it favors scrapping the current treaty in favor of a voluntary accord.

Kyoto has been sharply criticized by much of Canadian big business, especially the country's Alberta-based oil industry, which has long been a key supporter of the Conservatives and the various right-wing parties out of which it emerged.



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