

Australia: Howard's reception for the Beaconsfield miners—a cynical charade

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Hypocrisy in official circles reached new heights in Canberra last week. The occasion was a reception hosted by Prime Minister John Howard to honour Beaconsfield mine disaster survivors Brant Webb, Todd Russell, their rescuers and deceased miner Larry Knight.

The audacious and skilled rescue of Webb and Russell at the beginning of May—the two were trapped underground for two weeks by a massive rock fall—won the admiration of millions of ordinary people, as did the courage displayed by the two miners throughout their grueling ordeal. The tragic fate of Larry Knight, killed by the rock fall, brought forth a flood of genuine sympathy across the country and internationally.

Howard's 2,000-strong stage-managed event, held in the Great Hall of Parliament House, had little in common, however, with this popular sentiment. Parliament was suspended for two hours to allow a horde of political charlatans and mediocrities of all stripes to rub shoulders with hundreds of Beaconsfield residents flown in free of charge from Tasmania by two publicity-seeking airlines.

The scene was nothing short of surreal. After all, miners have never been particularly welcome in Canberra. Historically, they have been at the forefront of mass working class demonstrations and protests against the policies emanating from the nation's capital. As recently as 1996 they stormed parliament house in opposition to Howard's anti-working class budget and its repressive workplace relations measures. At that time, they were officially greeted with fear and loathing, backed up by police truncheons and arrests.

But last week, Webb and Russell and their Beaconsfield colleagues found their hands being pumped and backs slapped by politicians and officials who, under normal circumstances, would not have given these working people the time of day. The two miners, together with Knight's teenage daughter Lauren, were on the official dais flanked by Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition leader Kim Beazley.

Viewing the scene, one could not help but wonder how

two honest workers and an equally honest miner's daughter, not to mention the unassuming folk of Beaconsfield, had found themselves in such a position.

From Howard and Beazley's point of view there was real political mileage to be gained. The two miners have been temporarily catapulted to national and international fame, winning broad support and popular esteem. Howard and Beazley lack both support and esteem—and decided they could not afford to miss the opportunity to cash in.

The two politicians are also acutely conscious of the deep-seated hostility that has developed among large sections of the population to the entire parliamentary set-up. Howard is desperate to latch on to anything that will divert this growing antagonism by promoting a false sense of commonality. Beazley, equally concerned about widespread alienation, does all he can to assist.

It was with these considerations in mind that Howard and Beazley made speeches to the Canberra gathering laced with references to national unity, all-embracing "mateship" and claims that the courage, endurance, resilience and strength of the trapped men and rescuers alike were "distinctly Australian characteristics".

There is nothing united or equal about Australian society—something of which Howard and Beazley are particularly conscious. Thanks to the current government's pro-market policies, and those of its Labor predecessors, society has become ever more polarised. The divide between a small layer of the obscenely rich and the millions of ordinary Australians grows ever wider.

Nor is there anything "distinctly Australian" about the courage and selflessness of the Beaconsfield rescue team. Expression of working class solidarity can be found among ordinary working people right around the globe. On the other hand, the country's boardrooms and parliamentary circles are dominated by other "characteristics"—selfishness, greed, rivalry, acquisitiveness, backstabbing, lies and deceit—that are also international.

As for the miners' resilience and endurance—qualities that Howard has so lately come to admire—these arise, not from

their nationality, but from the hard and dangerous work they carry out just to earn a living—something entirely foreign to well-heeled politicians like Howard and Beazley. And these conditions will be made all the more onerous and unsafe under the new industrial laws just introduced by Howard's government.

Apeing Howard, Beazley declared to the gathering: "It was the power of mateship... that drove the tremendous effort behind the rescue and made sure we would stop at nothing until our mates were on the ground." This "mateship" was not in evidence when Beazley was a minister in the Labor governments that ruthlessly implemented open market policies between 1983 and 1996. By the late 1980s, rank and file miners were so angered by the savage attacks on their conditions, that they forced the Miners Federation to disaffiliate from the Labor Party.

In the course of the ceremony, the prime minister announced an \$8 million fund for the Beaconsfield community, to be overseen by the government and the local council, supposedly to help the town's population adjust to the possible closure of, or reduced production at, the mine. In the same week, 43 redundancies were announced, while the owners are pushing to restart production in some areas, even though neither of the two inquiries into the disaster has yet begun.

The fund is nothing but a cheap public relations stunt for the Howard government. Howard has never shelled out a single dollar, or lifted a finger, to assist the many thousands of other workers made unemployed, or communities devastated, by his government's big business policies.

Howard and Beazley appeared very satisfied with the Canberra event. But the question remains: why did the workers of Beaconsfield go along with it? How did they get drawn into doing something that, just a few weeks earlier, they would have scorned?

After all, one could safely assume that Webb, Russell and the rest of Beaconsfield's working population are as hostile to the Howard government as any other section of the working class. Indeed, one miner expressed the general disgust, contemptuously referring to Howard as "little Johnny" when speaking to the media outside the reception.

Perhaps Webb and Russell felt they had a responsibility to go along with the charade in order to nail the \$8 million for their community. Maybe they felt that their rescuers deserved some kind of official recognition, and that they should shelve any political misgivings for the day. Such a perspective was actively encouraged by their union, the Australian Workers Union and its national secretary Bill Shorten, which ensured that nothing was done to disrupt the proceedings.

To contain any rumblings among workers, Shorten read

out a brief, muted statement criticising the government's industrial relations legislation for attacking the role of the unions and making workplaces less safe, then marched everyone into the reception. For his services—and those of his union—the AWU received an honourable mention in Howard's speech, a reference Shorten will no doubt use in the future to harness support in business circles for his planned political career as a Labor member of parliament.

Some days after Howard's public display of "unity" with the miners was over, the prime minister criticised Shorten for "politicising" the Beaconsfield rescue. In response, Shorten said he thought it "legitimate to question the motives behind his \$1 million tea party in Canberra" and "to question his motives in the \$8 million package" His hypocrisy is breathtaking. Having made sure the "tea party" went without a hitch, Shorten tries to regain credibility in the working class by criticising Howard—after the event.

The whole affair serves to highlight the fundamental political problem facing millions of working people: while they oppose the policies and agenda of the government, and are critical of the Labor Party and the unions, they have no alternative perspective to combat them. That is why they can be led by the nose by Shorten and used and manipulated by the likes of Howard and Beazley.

What the Beaconsfield miners, and workers everywhere need, is to make a definitive political break from the unions and the Labor Party that work to subordinate them to the Howard government and the capitalist order as a whole, and embrace instead an international socialist perspective, based on their own independent interests and aspirations. Guided by such a perspective, which challenges the very framework of the profit system, the courage, tenacity and skill—displayed with such force by the Beaconsfield workers—will become a material force in the struggle to refashion the world on a new and progressive basis.



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