

Militarism and Howard's "Australian values" campaign

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Less than a month after the Australian government announced its commitment to the "war on terror" for the foreseeable future and a \$10 billion expansion of the army, it has launched a new campaign to restore what Prime Minister Howard describes as "Australian values". Just like similar moves to promote national "values" in Japan, Britain, New Zealand and the Netherlands in recent weeks, the purpose of the Australian campaign is to create a political environment for escalating militarism and a deepening assault on democratic rights.

The Howard government has been among the most slavish supporters of the crimes committed by the Bush administration under the auspices of the "war on terror". It provided political and material support for the illegal war in Afghanistan and then, despite overwhelming popular opposition, joined the "coalition of the willing" to invade Iraq. The debacles produced by the US-led occupation—around 100,000 Iraqis killed along with thousands of coalition troops and the devastation of the country's economy and infrastructure—have stopped neither Washington nor Canberra. As the US paves the way for its next war of aggression, against Iran, the Australian political establishment is signalling its continued and unwavering support.

There is no question that one of the major factors behind Howard's Australian values campaign is the upcoming federal elections, due next year. The Australian economy is starting to unravel, with rising interest rates and inflation driven by high fuel prices. Property prices are rapidly falling and the China-fuelled commodities boom is threatening to collapse. Howard hopes to divert mounting disaffection and anger on the part of millions of ordinary people—and pre-empt any critical probing of his political, economic and social agenda—by mounting a "khaki campaign" centred on militarism and nationalism.

But there are profound political issues at stake that go beyond the next election. The eruption of US militarism and the escalating conflicts between the major powers over trade, resources and markets signals the breakdown of the post-war international order and the opening of a new period of inter-imperialist conflicts. In every country, nationalism and patriotism are being ratcheted up, along with xenophobia and racism, to prepare the populations for war.

Just as the "war on terror" is the smokescreen behind which the Bush administration is seeking to establish its hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East against its rivals in Europe and Asia, so it has become the means for the Australian government to win US-backing for its own neo-colonial aspirations in the South Pacific.

Under the banner of promoting the "Australian values" of democracy and citizens' rights, and combatting the threat of anarchy and terrorism, the Howard government has already forced "regime change" in East Timor and is trying to do likewise in the Solomon Islands. Vanuatu, PNG and Fiji are also in its sights. Canberra's real aim is to secure the region's lucrative natural resources, and the financial and strategic interests of the Australian ruling elite.

The centrepiece of the restoration of "Australian values" at home is the

imposition of a new citizenship test. A "discussion paper" released on September 17 proposed that applicants must pass an English-language exam, demonstrate a knowledge of Australian history, customs and values, and be a resident of the country for four years, twice the present requirement. The government has called for public submissions before legislation is passed next year ahead of the election.

The new citizenship requirements follow a series of remarks by Howard and senior government ministers condemning Australian Muslims for not subscribing to the country's values. The prime minister recently criticised certain Australian Muslims for being "resistant to integration" and failing to learn English. After attacking various Islamic leaders for their refusal to fully endorse the "war on terror", he specifically noted the sceptical response of many Muslims towards last month's alleged terror plot to blow up passenger planes over the Atlantic.

Howard's remarks were directed not only against Muslims, but against anyone voicing doubts over the "war on terror". Five years after the September 11 terrorist attacks, millions of people have become increasingly critical of the terror alerts being manufactured or politically manipulated by the Bush administration and its backers in Britain, Australia and elsewhere. These have all invariably been followed by new and ever-more draconian attacks on civil liberties.

In response to this negative sentiment, the Howard government has turned to outright intimidation: any expression of doubt or scepticism about any aspect of the "war on terror" will henceforth be regarded as "un-Australian". Above all, any discussion of the real character of, and motivations behind, the "war on terror" will be beyond the pale.

The prime minister has made no secret that the citizenship laws are part of a plan to promote a new Australian nationalism. "We're not ashamed of this country, we are in fact very proud of what it has achieved," Howard declared. "If we've made a mistake in the past in relation to national identity it's that we've crawled away from it a little too frequently. We went through a period of time I reckon about 10, 15, 20 years ago where we were sort of almost apologising for what this country had achieved and being too deferential to alternative cultures."

In other words, the policy of "multiculturalism", promoted by successive governments from the 1970s on, is now being replaced by the celebration of an English-speaking patriotic culture. Immigrants are expected to subsume their heritage, language and culture into a homogenous "Australian" identity.

In an interview with the *Australian*, Andrew Robb, the immigration minister's parliamentary secretary, spelled out why. He told the Murdoch paper that as the globalisation of economic life had left people feeling more insecure, the role of nationalism had become more important. "It is monumental change taking place and people know they can't do much about it, but what they can do is ensure that those who are part of the local community are committed to the family," he declared. "In a sense we have become more tribal as we have become more global."

Here Robb makes clear the essential issue: the deep-seated crisis of the

present social order—a product of the fundamental contradiction between world economy and the globalisation of production and economic life on the one hand, and the outmoded nation state system on the other—has completely undermined the old national reformist programs and “consensus” politics of the past. None of the official parties—conservative or social democratic—in any country can command popular support for its political and economic agenda. They all face, instead, growing alienation, hostility and anger at their ever-escalating drive for “international competitiveness” and the consequent attacks on wages, social infrastructure, public services and democratic rights. That is why they have seized upon the “war on terror”—as the means of diverting this mass disaffection into collective fear of an external threat. It is an attempt to use the politics of fear, along with militarism and nationalism, as the new basis of winning electoral support.

The Australian government’s campaign for a new “national identity” is precisely, as Robb makes clear, an attempt to fashion a “tribal” mentality—i.e., to cultivate a social layer characterised by backwardness, parochialism and patriotism as the constituency for its reactionary political and social agenda.

In reality there is no “national identity”. Australian society is deeply divided, wracked by sharp class divisions and unprecedented levels of social inequality. The wealthiest 200 individuals have a combined wealth of more than \$100 billion, while 3.6 million people—one-fifth of all households—survive on less than \$400 a week. Those who previously considered themselves “middle class” have seen their wages and conditions stagnate and decline in recent years, while the vast majority of working people carry the burden of massive personal debt, engage in a weekly struggle to make ends meet and have no job security.

It comes as no surprise that the Labor Party has not only wholeheartedly supported the government’s campaign, but Labor leader Kim Beazley has tried to outflank Howard from the right—criticising the prime minister for not going far enough. A few days before Howard made his “Australian values” announcement, Beazley demanded that all entrants into Australia, including tourists, be forced to sign an oath of loyalty to Australian values. “I firmly believe Australian values of respect for each other, mateship, fairness, freedom and respect for our laws are the front line in the struggle against extremists and terrorists,” he declared in a statement on September 11. “Why wait until somebody applies for citizenship before making them commit to live as part of our society?”

Beazley has also proposed that “Australian values” be included in school curricula. “If we have got proper respect being taught in schools—all schools—it would go a long way to giving Australians a sense of comfort that people are taking Australian values seriously,” he stated on September 3.

The values “discussion” has been marked by the recycling of the most backward and filthy ideology. One particularly striking comment by John Stone, a former National Party senator, was published in this month’s *Quadrant* magazine. The article, titled “The Muslim Problem and What to Do about It”, railed against the “Islamic cancer in our body politic” and demanded a ban on further Muslim immigration. Echoing Beazley’s proposal, Stone called for all entrants to Australia to sign a “formal governmental statement of those aspects of our national life to which we expect all newcomers to conform”, in order to deter Muslim visitors.

The *Quadrant* article was only the most graphic example of the growing tendency of the media to sound fascist themes. In many cases, the only significant difference with 1930s Nazi propaganda is that the word “Muslim” now replaces the word “Jew”.

Stone’s positions have a long pedigree. In 1901, when the Australian nation was established, its founding ideology was “White Australia”. The “Australian values” of racism and xenophobia were utilised as the means of blunting and suppressing the sharp class antagonisms that had already emerged. Both the conservatives and the Labor Party enforced the White

Australia policy, invoking the spectre of “Asian hordes” invading the continent and destroying the living standards of “white” citizens. Asians and blacks were barred from entering the country until the 1960s, while the country’s indigenous population was denied citizenship status until 1967. Above all the ruling elite used racism to try to undermine workers solidarity, and prevent the development of an independent political movement based on a recognition of the common interests of working people internationally.

While the White Australia policy was junked three decades ago due to the country’s increasing economic integration with Asia, the ruling class has retained the essential elements of its strategy. Once again it is attempting to cultivate racial divisions by scapegoating the most vulnerable sections of society.

This poses enormous dangers before the working class. In countries such as Sri Lanka and Yugoslavia, the deliberate fomenting of ethnic and religious divisions has wreaked terrible devastation on entire populations. Australia is a highly diverse society, with more than one in five citizens born overseas. In the last census just 35 percent claimed “Australian ancestry”. Cultural and ethnic diversity is even greater in the major urban centres, where social tensions are most extreme. In Sydney, for example, one-third of all residents was born overseas and more than one-quarter speaks a language other than English at home.

Irrespective of Australia’s specific national particularities, xenophobic and communalist politics have their own logic. The anti-Muslim race riot which erupted on Sydney’s Cronulla beach last December—provoked in particular by talk-back radio “shock jocks”, the chief promoters of “Australian values” and the Howard government—foreshadows the inevitable outbreak of further ethnic-based conflicts unless the mounting tensions in Australian society find an alternative, progressive outlet.

Disgust and hostility towards the government’s racism and militarism are not sufficient to counter these dangers, nor is protest action directed at pressuring the powers that be. In the final analysis, the underlying cause of the noxious promotion of a twenty-first century version of “White Australia” is the capitalist profit system itself, which is defended by the entire official political establishment, including Labor, the Democrats and the Greens.

The movement of millions of people around the world every day is a by-product of the extraordinary revolution in technology over the past 25 years—particularly communications and transport—and the globalisation of every aspect of economic life. The populations of every country are increasingly global, demonstrating the completely reactionary and anachronistic character of politics and programs based on the nation state.

Against the national exclusivity embodied in Howard’s “Australian values”, working people require a new set of universal values, grounded on the global realities of the twenty-first century. Such values must champion the rights and interests of humanity as a whole—against war and militarism, against social inequality and all forms of oppression, in defence of democratic rights and civil liberties and for freedom of movement for all, accompanied by full citizenship rights in any part of world.

This is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party. We urge all those opposed to nationalism and militarism to join the struggle to build the SEP as the new independent political movement of the working class, based on the principles and program of socialist internationalism.



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