

Australian government gets its way at Pacific leaders' summit

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The 16-member Pacific Islands Forum concluded its annual meeting on Tuesday in Fiji, after re-electing Australia's Greg Urwin as the organisation's secretary-general and issuing a joint communiqué satisfying all Canberra's demands. While the Forum's opening day was marked by denunciations of the Howard government's arrogance and belligerence, its closure saw the Pacific Island governments fall into line.

"There is one inescapable conclusion from this Pacific summit," the *Australian's* commentator Steve Lewis triumphantly declared. "Money talks. For all the bluster from leaders who feel aggrieved by Australia's perceived heavy-handedness, the annual forum backed John Howard when it mattered most. Australia has reinforced its position as the only regional power with the military muscle—and financial strength—to shape pan-Pacific policies and strategies."

This capitulation was highlighted by the absence of any challenge to Urwin's re-election. The Australian official was first installed as secretary-general in an acrimonious 2003 meeting that saw Canberra bully the other members into overturning the established convention that the post be reserved for a Pacific Islander. The Howard government reportedly promised that Urwin would only serve one term before stepping down, but subsequently reneged.

Earlier this month, the Melanesian countries—Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Fiji, and Vanuatu—announced they were preparing to contest Urwin's post. By the time the Forum commenced, however, the Fijian government, which had been nominated to field a candidate, backed down. Fiji has endeavoured to placate Canberra in recent months. In August, Howard named the country as a potential target for Australian military intervention, along with Vanuatu and PNG.

"We have a good relationship with Australia and I'm not in any way willing to give that up," Fijian foreign minister Kaliopate Tavola declared ahead of the Forum. He claimed that Canberra's threat to cut Pacific aid, unless various conditions were met, was centrally aimed at the Solomons

and PNG, rather than Fiji. "Whatever differences these countries have against each other is perceived as a major hindrance to our relationship. Australia has played an important role in the Pacific as major aid donors."

The Fijian government's position is indicative of the venal character of the ruling elites throughout the Pacific. Dependent upon the patronage of Australia and other powers for their wealth and power, none of the regional governments is capable of mounting a genuine challenge to Australian neo-colonialism. Condemnations of the Howard government by figures such as Solomon Islands' prime minister Manasseh Sogavare and his PNG counterpart Michael Somare are aimed at maintaining control over the rising domestic opposition to Australia's aggressive intervention in the region. The Pacific governments also hope to improve their bargaining positions when it comes time to strike deals with Canberra.

Urwin's reinstallation was crucial for the Howard government. He helped draft and promote the "Pacific Plan", finalised last year. The Plan, which outlines an open-ended agenda for regional political and economic reform, forms the centrepiece of Canberra's efforts to secure Australia's strategic dominance and prevent rival powers from developing their regional influence. The Pacific Islands Forum communiqué formally endorsed the Pacific Plan and set out a number of objectives to be reached in the next 12 months. The document also demanded that "efforts be intensified" toward implementing the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER), which would remove tariffs and other trade constraints on Australian corporations operating in the region.

Urwin hailed the progress made on the Pacific Plan in his statement to the Forum delegates. He also referred to a project to install Forum officers in the state apparatuses of member countries. This is presently underway in the "Smaller Island States", such as Cook Islands and Kiribati, but will soon be expanded to all the Pacific countries. The program complements Canberra's own efforts to insert its police, judges and administrators throughout the region.

In 2003 the Australian-dominated Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) took over that country's major institutions, such as police, courts, prisons, media outlets and finance department. This neo-colonial operation was hailed as a model for further interventions, and in the past three years the Howard government has installed Australian police and judicial authorities in a number of countries, including PNG, Fiji, and Nauru. Under the banner of promoting "good governance", Canberra is assuming direct control over its neighbours.

Recent events in the Solomons demonstrate the real face of the Howard government's "humanitarian" interventions. Canberra has used its control of the Solomons' state apparatus to launch a series of provocations against the Sogavare government. Australian police have arrested Attorney-General Julian Moti and Immigration Minister Peter Shanel, raided Sogavare's office, and threatened to imprison the prime minister and other officials.

Sogavare has repeatedly threatened to expel Australian personnel from the Solomons, and presented a "five point plan" to the Forum, requesting other member states to replace Australian police and officials. He quickly caved in, however, and joined other island leaders in supporting the official communiqué, which hailed the "strong contribution RAMSI has made to the restoration of security, governance and rehabilitation of the economy of the Solomon Islands". The only sop to his "five point plan" was a vague and meaningless call for a review, which will do nothing to stop Canberra's ongoing dirty tricks in the Solomons.

Howard claimed victory. "There's been a strong reaffirmation of RAMSI, and that's really very good for the Pacific because in the long run the RAMSI way is the way of the future if other countries get into similar difficulties," he declared. "All that has been agreed is that there will be a review in the way it operates. I don't mind about that."

In taking this arrogant stance at the Forum, the Australian prime minister relies on the backing of Washington—a point that was underscored by the presence of Christopher Hill, US assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific. In return for Canberra's support for US aggression in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other states, Washington lends its weight to the Howard government's operations in Australia's "sphere of influence".

While Hill did not directly intervene in the debates, he left no doubt whose side Washington was on. He echoed Howard's demands for "good governance" in the Solomons and added that the US would like to do more in the region. "Each [country] has the same number of votes in the UN General Assembly, and we are of course very aware of that," he told the media. "The Pacific is the kind of place where when you pay attention to it, show some interest, it can pay

dividends."

Howard was satisfied with the Forum outcome, but the crisis in the Solomons remains unresolved and could have destabilising consequences across the region. Mounting opposition to RAMSI from ordinary Solomon Islanders remains, and Canberra's drive for "regime change" may yet force Sogavare to call for the removal of Australian forces. Following the release of the Forum communiqué, Sogavare claimed that his government would dictate the RAMSI review agenda. Howard immediately denied this.

Hugh White, professor of strategic studies at the Australian National University, has warned the Howard government not to take its position in the region for granted. "The government here in Canberra has been assuming that whatever happens, RAMSI won't be thrown out of the Solomons because it is too important to them," he declared yesterday. "I think that is too complacent."

White is the former head of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, the organisation that in June 2003 drafted "Our Failing Neighbour," the report which became the blueprint for RAMSI. A staunch supporter of the intervention, the academic has recently issued several statements articulating concerns within the Australian ruling elite that the Howard government's belligerence may prove counterproductive amid rising anti-Australian sentiment.



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