US election result reverberates in Australia

James Cogan
15 November 2006

The repudiation of the Republican Party and the Iraq war in last Tuesday's mid-term US election is having a significant impact in Australia, where the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard has made support for the Bush administration the cornerstone of its foreign and domestic policies.

On the world arena, the Howard government has been one of the most strident defenders of US militarism, always ready to parrot the propaganda of the Bush White House that 9/11 marked the beginning of a "long war" between western civilization and Islamic fundamentalism.

The so-called "war on terror" has been the justification for Australian involvement in the illegal wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; Canberra's complicity in the ongoing Guantanamo Bay detention of Australian citizen David Hicks; plans for a massive increase in the size of the Australian armed forces; neo-colonial operations in the South Pacific; and, renewed ties and a defence pact with the Indonesian military. Domestically, it has been invoked to legitimise the brutal treatment of asylum seekers; anti-Muslim hysteria; demands for the protection of "Australian values"; and a raft of draconian legislation curtailing fundamental democratic rights.

The rejection of the Republicans by the American people, therefore, has triggered a degree of unease in the ranks of the conservative parties. They face the prospect that the US vote will invigorate the antiwar sentiments at home and cost them office in next year's elections. Over the longer term, there are fears that the Howard government—due to its close association with Bush and the Iraq war—could be marginalised as the new powers-that-be in Washington formulate a "change of course" to protect American interests in the Middle East and internationally.

Howard's response thus far has been to downplay the implications of the US result. He has rejected any suggestion that the vote reflected mass opposition in the US to the Iraq war and insisted it was the outcome of "cumulative unhappiness with the Republicans" over a variety of issues. He declared that he knew "for a fact" that there would be "no fundamental change in American policy". Within hours of the resignation of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Howard dismissed it as nothing more than a "gesture acknowledging the unease that some people have about the way the operation is going".

Above all, Howard has stressed that there will be no change in his government's support for the Bush administration's foreign policy and the Iraq occupation in particular, despite the overwhelming opposition in Australia to the war. Howard told journalists: "We've got to make a judgment as to what would be the consequences of leaving Iraq in circumstances which are seen as a defeat for the West. I just say to people who want to do that immediately that the cost for that would be enormous. It would be an enormous blow to American prestige and serves us nothing. To see America humiliated, particularly given the importance of the United States in our region with all the challenges we face with countries like North Korea, I think would be foolish in the extreme."

Howard's insistence that Australian geopolitical interests hinge on an alignment with Bush is underpinned by definite strategic and economic calculations. By providing assistance to Washington as it has attempted to seize control of the key oil producing region of the globe, Canberra has been able to secure US backing for a series of military and diplomatic interventions aimed at asserting Australia as the regional power in the South Pacific—against the efforts of south east Asian countries, European states and China to expand their influence. As an economic pay-off, the Bush administration sponsored the passage of a preferential trade agreement between Australia and the US in 2004, which sections of Australian industry hoped would open up substantial new export opportunities.

The government's orientation over the past five years has generally been endorsed by the corporate and media establishment and given bipartisan support by the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP). As a minor power with limited clout, Australian foreign policy has always centred on seeking the patronage of the major world power. Since World War II, Australian interests have been pursued within the framework of the US alliance—paid for by hosting American military bases and supporting the US in conflicts from the Korean War, to Vietnam, to the first Gulf War.

The US election result, however, has brought into the open the doubts in Australian ruling circles over the wisdom of tying their fortunes too closely with the crisis-stricken Bush administration and a failed war in the Middle East. The past three years have produced geo-political changes, as other powers have sought to take advantage of the quagmire facing the US to strengthen their own influence in other strategic parts of the globe.

In the Pacific, the weakened position of the US on the world stage has contributed to the defiance within the Pacific Island states of Howard's attempt to bully them with gunboat diplomacy or threats of intervention. While considerable resources and hundreds of Australian troops are tied down taking part in the Iraq occupation, sections of the local elite in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji are openly turning to other powers such as China as an alternative to Australia's traditional domination over their resources and territory.

Laura Tingle, a senior columnist for the *Australian Financial*

© World Socialist Web Site

Review, articulated these concerns in an article on November 10. Howard, she noted, had asserted the US was "the unrivalled global power" and he "was able to claim that he had produced a situation in which little Australia was being listened to and feted by the behemoth of the age". The need for the US to change policy, however, "will highlight to the rest of the world the extent to which the US's global authority has been vandalised" by the failure of the Iraq war.

"For Howard", Tingle continued, "the raw politics are that he will have to be much more circumspect about being seen to issue statements whose wording replicates words and policies issued in Washington. The perils of being uppity in the world will perhaps look greater, particularly against the backdrop of the deepening mire in which Australia finds itself in the South Pacific." On the economic front, the shift to the Democrats in the US could see "protectionist sentiment" that "could spell trouble for Australia on trade". Howard's support for Bush, she warned, "might be very readily forgotten" by the Democrat-controlled congress.

The November 10 editorial of the Melbourne *Age* was even blunter: "The question, then, is how is Australia's national interest served by continuing to meekly follow the Bush administration's lead? No-one should doubt the value of the US alliance, but the government needs to cut the umbilical cord to its 'best friend' in the White House. National policy must not be treated as a loyalty test. The Americans who have rejected Mr Bush are not called anti-American, so why should Australians be?..."

The *Age* concluded: "The Howard government has marched in step with the Bush administration and its blinkered ideology on most of the big issues of our time, but Americans have set a course for change. The longer Australia pretends otherwise, the more out of step it will be with the world and its reality."

The assessment of media commentators casts light on the stance now being taken by the Labor opposition. In the 2004 federal elections, the ALP refused to make any criticism or attack on the conservatives over their support for the Iraq invasion. Over the past month, however, as polling in the US indicated that the Republicans would suffer a debacle, the ALP has sought to differentiate itself from the Howard government in relation to Iraq, including repeated calls by its leader Kim Beazley for the withdrawal of Australian troops.

On November 9, commenting on the US election, Beazley told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "I think the overall view of the [US election] result is it's a vote for change. It is a statement by the American people, similar to a statement made, effectively, by the Australian people. They do not believe the war has made us safer from terrorism. They believe the war has been a mistake.... Things have to change and that is the light in which we ought to view the situation in Iraq. Too many people are getting killed."

On November 10, he followed his call for change with a declaration that Howard should tell Bush at the upcoming APEC summit in Vietnam that the Iraq war "was a mistake and we now have other priorities and our troops are coming home."

Labor's position on Iraq does not constitute an opposition to either US or Australian militarism. The ALP is a committed supporter of the US alliance and is not calling for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq. Labor also fully backs the US occupation of Afghanistan. It opposes war crimes prosecutions of the Bush, Blair and Howard governments, despite the illegality of the 2003 invasion, the lies over "weapons of mass destruction" and the slaughter of an estimated 655,000 Iraqis over the past three-and-a-half years.

Even Labor's call for "troops out" is utterly cynical. It is not a call for the withdrawal of *all* 1,400 Australian personnel assisting the US occupation. Beazley is proposing to pull out only a 500-strong combat unit currently based in two of the most stable provinces of southern Iraq. On October 19, while it received little media attention, Labor joined with the conservatives to vote down a resolution moved by the Greens in the upper house calling for the immediate withdrawal of all Australian troops.

The aim of the ALP is to present itself as the better party to put into effect an Australian "change of course", which distances Canberra somewhat from the record of the Bush administration and gives it some credibility to manoeuvre in its own sphere of influence. Beazley's reference last week to the "other priorities" of Australian foreign policy is a clear indication that a Labor government would intensify Australia's bellicose military activity in the Pacific.

At the same time, Beazley is sending signals to reassure Washington that a Labor government would be a reliable ally in the overall agenda of the American ruling class to use military force to maintain its global position. He has already hinted that he would support the deployment of additional Australian troops to Afghanistan if it were requested and endorsed the US threats against Iran and North Korea.

The majority of the Australian population views any foreign policy decisions by the Howard government with suspicion or outright hostility. Howard's ability to provide military backing to future US aggression has been compromised by its complicity in the lies and crimes that have accompanied the Iraq war. Labor, Beazley believes, can provide its US imperialist ally an equally loyal, but fresh face.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site