

Solomon Islands' government dismisses Australian police chief

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4 January 2007

The Solomon Islands' government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare effectively dismissed Shane Castles, the country's Australian police commissioner, on December 27. Castles, who had taken leave in Australia, was barred from returning to the Solomons, and the government has since issued advertisements to find a new police commissioner.

Foreign Minister Patterson Oti released a public statement which described Castles as an "undesirable immigrant" and stated, "his continued presence here [is] considered prejudicial to the peace, defence, public safety, public order, public morality, security and good government of Solomon Islands".

The incident marks another setback for Canberra's agenda in the Solomons and the South Pacific. In 2003, after declaring the Solomons a "failed state" and potential terrorist haven, the Howard government dispatched a military-backed intervention force called the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI). Australian personnel continue to dominate the Solomons' state apparatus, including its police, courts, prisons, media, economic institutions and finance department, and public service. RAMSI is considered a model for Australian neo-colonial intervention throughout the South Pacific, with Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu among those targeted for similar treatment.

The Howard government's strategy is now under threat amid widespread and mounting hostility throughout the region towards its aggressive operations. Governments across the South Pacific are increasingly resistant to permitting Australian personnel to be inserted in their police and legal systems, and are looking to rival powers in Europe and Asia, particularly China, for aid and trade deals to counterbalance Canberra's influence.

Castles's dismissal follows a series of Australian provocations aimed at destabilising the Sogavare government. After coming to power in April last year, the Solomons' prime minister issued a number of limited criticisms of Canberra and called for the formulation of a RAMSI "exit strategy". The Howard government immediately rejected these demands and worked to undermine the national government. Tensions openly erupted in September after Sogavare expelled Patrick Cole, Australia's High Commissioner in Honiara, for conspiring with opposition parliamentarians against the government.

Police Commissioner Castles played a highly significant and provocative role in the ensuing manoeuvres and dirty tricks orchestrated from Canberra, particularly in regard to the witchhunt of former Solomon Islands Attorney-General Julian Moti.

Immediately after his appointment as attorney-general last September, Moti was subjected to a slanderous campaign from the Howard government and the Australian media relating to his 1997 acquittal in a Vanuatu court on statutory rape charges. Without any evidence brought against him, Moti was accused of being guilty of the crime and of bribing a judge to escape conviction. Blatantly manipulating provisions of Australia's sex tourism legislation, the Howard government then demanded his extradition.

Castles ordered Moti's arrest after he landed in the Solomons on a PNG military plane on October 10. Moti had been unlawfully arrested in Port Moresby on the orders of Australian police based in the PNG branch of the Australian-controlled Transnational Crime Unit, but later skipped bail and left the country, seemingly with the knowledge and cooperation of the PNG government. Castles charged Moti with entering the Solomons without the proper paperwork, after authorities in Canberra cancelled his passport. (Moti is a Fijian-born Australian citizen.)

The Australian police chief ignored the Sogavare government's insistence that Moti had already been issued the necessary legal authorisation to enter the country, and instead alleged a conspiracy on the part of the government. He arrested Immigration Minister Peter Shanel for allegedly misleading him over Moti's immigration status. Castles also ordered a raid on Sogavare's office on October 20, while the prime minister was away at the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Fiji. Police kicked open the door and seized a fax machine which Shanel had allegedly used to communicate with Moti.

A Solomons' court last month dismissed all the charges brought against the former attorney-general. Castles then announced that he would continue to investigate both Moti and the government and suggested Moti could soon face re-arrest on forgery charges relating to the immigration documents issued by the government.

Castles's provocations received the backing of the Howard

government. Its calculated witchhunt of Moti had nothing to do with the 1997 rape charge or any immigration issues. It was instead aimed at destabilising the Sogavare government and, more directly, at derailing its Commission of Inquiry into riots which erupted last April, shortly before the government came to power. Moti had been centrally involved in implementing the inquiry, which was to examine the events and causes of the two days of unrest in the capital, Honiara. The investigation threatened to expose RAMSI's responsibility for provoking the violence, as well as the broader discontent and opposition among ordinary Solomon Islanders towards the Australian occupying forces.

While the Australian political and media establishment unanimously portrays RAMSI as a humanitarian operation enjoying the overwhelming support of the local population, anti-RAMSI sentiment is widespread and escalating. Unemployment and poverty remain rife, and Canberra has made no effort to ensure adequate health, education, and other social services are provided for ordinary people. RAMSI personnel meanwhile enjoy large salaries relative to those received by locals, which has artificially inflated the price of food, rent, and other living costs.

Castles's appointment as police chief in April 2005 coincided with mounting opposition to RAMSI's presence. The previous commissioner, William Morrell, was a British police officer who had been appointed shortly before Australia launched the RAMSI intervention. In 2005, Morrell wished to serve a second term, but British and European Union funding for his salary had expired and Canberra declined to supply the money.

Australian aid was instead provided for the Howard government's man on the ground. Castles had previously been the Australian Federal Police's (AFP) General Manager of International Operations, and was responsible for coordinating AFP resources to RAMSI. His elevation as Solomon Islands police commissioner removed all pretence of police independence from RAMSI and left no-one in the Solomons in any doubt that Canberra was determined to maintain direct control.

Howard has denounced the Sogavare government's expulsion of Castles, declaring the officer had done an "excellent job" and describing his dismissal as "an unfair and unreasonable decision and not justified by anything he did". "It gets to the very heart of what's wrong with the Solomon Islands," Foreign Minister Alexander Downer added. "The reason the country has been in a state of crisis is because of appalling levels of governance, and this is a further illustration of it."

Howard and Downer's utterly hypocritical complaints are of a piece with their demands that the Sogavare government respect the "rule of law" by abandoning its defence of Julian Moti. In each case the Howard government—backed by the media, Labor and the entire political establishment—has portrayed Australian foreign policy in the South Pacific as an exercise in altruism, centred on the promotion of democracy

and opposition to corruption.

Canberra's actions are in fact designed to advance the strategic and economic interests of the Australian ruling elite. The Howard government's increasingly aggressive and reckless policies are driven by a concern of losing control of the country's traditional sphere of influence to rival powers in Europe and Asia, particularly China.

Howard indicated these concerns in a revealing interview published in the *Sunday Telegraph* on December 31. Speaking of the South Pacific countries, he said, "I can understand Australians saying, 'Well, look, let's forget about it. Leave them to their own devices; don't waste any money.' But that's the wrong approach to take, because they will fall into the hands of the evil from other countries... Certainly there's a bit of a battle between China and Taiwan... If we just throw up our arms and go away, you'll end up with these places being taken over by interests that are very hostile to Australia."

Howard made clear his perspective of unending military deployments in the region. "This is a long, hard road, and it will need great patience and understanding by the Australian public to live with, probably for a period of 10 to 20 years, with a two-steps-forward, one-step-backward situation..."

"That's why we've been increasing the size of our army. It's all designed to give us the capacity to deal with things in the region. And this is our responsibility. The rest of the world looks to us to do it, and the more we are able to play our part effectively here, the less is legitimately expected of us in other parts of the world. That's not to say we won't do other things, but if we can have an effective stabilising role in the whole Pacific region, I can assure you that is mightily important to the Americans and to our allies in Europe."

These statements represent an ominous warning to working people both in the South Pacific and Australia. The Howard government has already flouted international law and utilised military intervention and war as an instrument of foreign policy—in Iraq and the Pacific. In direct opposition to popular sentiment, both at home and throughout the region, Howard's comments demonstrate that it is gearing up for further military incursions.



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