British Lancet medical journal calls for defeat of Australian government

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26 April 2007

One of the world's most respected medical journals, the British-based *Lancet*, has published an editorial calling for the defeat of Australia's Howard government in this year's federal election because of the damage it is inflicting on public health and medical research.

The April 21 editorial, entitled "The Politics of Fear and Neglect," is unprecedented. The *Lancet*, a peer-reviewed journal published since 1823, has never before called for the removal of a government, although it has criticised the stance of the British and US governments in Iraq.

With a million readers online, the *Lancet* has an unparalleled scientific and medical reputation. Many of the world's leading research doctors are editorial consultants or subscribers. The editors' decision to intervene in the Australian election is a mark of the concern and disgust felt in the medical and scientific communities in Australia and internationally toward Canberra's shameful record on indigenous health, medical science and environmental policy.

The editorial condemned "Prime Minister John Howard's indifference to the academic medical community and his profound intolerance to those less secure than himself and his administration". As the latest example, it cited Howard's comment on a Melbourne radio station last week, declaring that people living with HIV should not be allowed to enter and live in Australia.

HIV/AIDS groups, refugee organisations and civil rights bodies also expressed outrage at Howard's suggestion. Even though HIV is not an infectious disease, his government's current policy excludes virtually all HIV victims, unless they have the resources to guarantee to pay for their own life-time medical treatment. The policy not only denies basic democratic rights, it discriminates against the poor and needy, who are most likely to be infected.

Lancet went on to censure Health Minister Tony Abbott, who "recently insulted Aboriginal peoples by claiming that those who spoke up for indigenous health were simply 'establishing politically and morally correct credentials.'"

Abbott's diatribe against doctors and others raising concerns about indigenous health came in response to an April 2 report by Oxfam Australia and the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, which ranked Australia as the worst among wealthy nations at improving the health of indigenous people.

The *Close the Gap* report said Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders died nearly 20 years younger than other Australians, compared to the US, Canada and New Zealand, where average indigenous life expectancy was approximately seven years less than the non-indigenous population. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant mortality was three times the rate of other Australians, and 50 percent higher than for indigenous children in the US and New Zealand. The figures reinforced the findings of the 2003 United Nations Human Development Report, which said the proportion of indigenous Australians expected to live to the age of 65 was lower than for impoverished countries like Bangladesh and Nigeria.

Most of the diseases leading to premature death, hospitalisation and chronic disability were preventable if diagnosed early and treated with affordable medicines. Many of the poor health outcomes were related to poverty; overcrowded housing; poor sanitation; lack of access to education; poor access to medical care for accurate diagnosis and treatment; and poor nutrition. Spending on Aboriginal and Torres

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Strait Islander health had increased, but the "health gap" remained—the federal government still only spent approximately $0.70 per capita on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health for every $1 spent on the rest of the population.

On climate change, the journal indicted Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull for "apparently see[ing] little new in the latest alarming assessments by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change".

In particular, the editorial condemned the government's influence on Australia's scientific institutions since 1996, quoting the award-winning scientist Ian Lowe who wrote that "the present government has gone to extraordinary lengths to silence independent opinion within the research community".

Last October, Howard highlighted his government's hostility to independently conducted medical research when he dismissed as "not plausible" a study published in the *Lancet*, conducted by the Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health, that estimated 655,000 Iraqis had been killed as the result of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. The study applied tried and tested epidemiological methods to produce the only scientifically reliable estimate of the casualties. But Howard immediately joined British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W Bush in calling its methodology "flawed" and its results "suspect".

The *Lancet* stated: "2007 is an election year for Australia. How the country interprets its past and sees its hopes for the future will be critical not only for the health of its people but also for the contribution Australia makes to world health. At present, Australian politicians are scoring well below their potential." It concluded: "This year provides an opportunity at the ballot box to bring a new enlightenment to Australian health and medical science."

It must be said, however, that the *Lancet* editorial's hopes for a "new enlightenment" after the Australian election will be dashed by any incoming Labor government. Labor's shadow health minister Nicola Roxon told reporters the editorial was "a devastating indictment of the Howard government's record on health". But neither she nor Labor leader Kevin Rudd have offered the slightest indication that a Labor government would be any different.

Rudd has maintained, for example, a conspicuous silence on Howard's HIV stance, despite written requests from AIDS organisations asking him to oppose it. This is in line with Labor's consistent record of bipartisanship with Howard in his demonisation of refugees, Muslims and other victims of government policy.

On indigenous policy, Labor's just-released platform for next weekend's party conference substantially embraces Howard's so-called "practical reconciliation" agenda of dismantling welfare, job-creation, housing and health care programs in favour of free-market policies. Under the draft platform, a Rudd government would continue many of the Howard government's measures, including pressuring indigenous people into buying their own homes on former communal land, as a substitute for welfare housing.

The platform proclaims "the importance of economic development in increasing self-reliance". This is yet another attempt to justify the abolition of welfare and to absolve government of any responsibility in providing Aboriginal people with decent, well-paid and secure jobs—the necessary pre-requisite for making any significant inroads into the appalling levels of poverty and disease.

More generally, Labor is just as committed as the Howard government to the privatisation of health, cutting social spending and subordinating medical and scientific research to corporate profit requirements. Rudd has pledged Labor to a new wave of free-market economic restructuring, deepening the first "wave" carried through by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, which laid the basis for Howard's policies.

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