

Australian neo-colonialism comes home: The Northern Territory and the Solomon Islands

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A series of direct and chilling parallels exists between the Howard government's police-military takeover of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia and its military interventions in the Solomon Islands and other neighbouring South Pacific states.

The NT operation is being justified on the basis that the region amounts to a "failed state" in need of an initial period of "stabilisation". Police and military forces are being sent in significant numbers, we are told, in the interests of protecting Aboriginal children from sexual abuse. The underlying motivations are entirely "humanitarian".

Several of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) being deployed to the NT have previously served in the Solomon Islands. And the man appointed as operational commander of the prime minister's hand-picked task force is none other than Shane Castles—former AFP officer and Solomon Islands police commissioner.

To grasp what Howard's plan is really about, it is important to review the record of his government's recent dealings in the Solomons.

In July 2003, Howard labelled the Solomons a "failed state" and dispatched more than 2,000 troops and federal police, along with scores of bureaucrats. The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) forces took direct control of the state apparatus, including the police, prisons, courts, and governmental finance and economic bodies. Howard made great play of warning that unrest in the tiny country posed a grave threat to Australian national security. At the same time, he sought to allay potential public opposition by insisting that the whole affair was driven by his government's concern for the fate of ordinary Solomon Islanders. To that end, the mission was prominently labelled "Helpem Fren" (Help a Friend).

The real reasons for the military intervention were bound up with the strategic and economic calculations of Australia's ruling elite. The South Pacific has long been regarded in official circles as Canberra's "sphere of influence", with Howard recently characterising it as "our special patch". Escalating great power rivalry in the region, driven by China's growing economic and diplomatic influence, poses a threat to Australia's strategic hegemony as well as its considerable economic interests.

Howard's decision to intervene in the Solomons constituted a tactical shift, following the US-led invasion of Iraq that was launched just months earlier. In launching the Iraq war the Bush administration openly disregarded international law, utilising military force to seize control of critical resources. As part of the quid pro quo for the Howard government's participation in Bush's "coalition of the willing", Washington backed Canberra's aggressive drive to assert its direct control over the South Pacific.

Four years after the initial intervention, the continuing social crisis facing Solomon Islanders demonstrates the fraudulent character of the Howard government's "humanitarian" rhetoric. The country remains among the most impoverished in the world, with extreme levels of poverty and unemployment. The majority of the population survives through subsistence farming, while those living in the capital Honiara have seen a significant decline in their living standards. The influx of well-paid RAMSI and other Australian personnel has fuelled inflation and driven up the costs of housing, food, and other essential items.

While RAMSI-associated layers now dominate Honiara's housing market, thousands of local residents are forced to reside in squalid squatter camps. Such is the level of social inequality that senior Solomon Islands' officials have recently issued a number of warnings. The Central Bank's deputy governor Denton Rarawa last month noted what he characterised as the "RAMSI effect", which was exacerbating inflation and creating an unsustainable housing market bubble. Former Central Bank governor Tony Hughes echoed these remarks and warned that "if it is not reversed, inequality and widening awareness of what is causing it will have disastrous consequences for Pacific nations... persistent unfairness breeds bitterness, and unattended bitterness breeds an urge to destroy".

This situation has been directly caused by the Howard government's policies. Canberra commits more than \$200 million in so-called aid money each year to the Solomons, but virtually none of this money is spent on health, education, and other social services. More than half of the total "aid" bill, \$112 million, funds the salaries of Australian Federal Police, while half of the remaining sum is paid to GRM—a company owned by Australia's wealthiest individual James

Packer—largely for running the infamous Solomon Islands prison system.

Canberra spends just \$2 million a year on education and an average of less than \$9 million a year on the health of the Solomons population. Even these pitiful sums overstate the real level of Australian “aid”. The \$2 million in education money funds Australian university scholarships for a small number of Solomon Islanders—those targetted by Canberra as the next generation of the political elite. Nothing is spent on schools or literacy programs within the country, despite an estimated one-quarter of the population being unable to read or write. Similarly, a significant proportion of the health funding is spent on restructuring the government’s health ministry, rather than on direct medical assistance. There remains an acute shortage of medical workers in the Solomons, with a ratio of 10,000 patients to each doctor.

This is the template for the Howard government’s approach to the social catastrophe that confronts the Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory. And it will have very similar results.

Not a single additional cent will be spent on healthcare, education, housing, employment, or any other social services. Howard, together with his indigenous affairs minister and former military officer, Mal Brough, has framed the entire operation in military terms. As an article in the *Australian* noted yesterday: “Resources are ‘deployed’. Situations are ‘stabilised’ and then, hopefully, ‘normalised’. Towns will be ‘secured’. Maps are distributed. All part of a ‘three-phase operation’ to rescue the children.”

The idea that the police and the army can halt child sexual abuse and the myriad other social problems afflicting remote indigenous communities, is utterly absurd—as the experiences of Solomon Islanders demonstrates.

In March last year, *Time* magazine’s Pacific edition revealed that a 2004 report commissioned by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) on child sexual exploitation in the Solomons had documented dozens of examples of child pornography, prostitution, and sex tourism. The article, entitled “Generation Exploited”, pointed out that the Howard government had done nothing in response to the report’s findings and had ignored appeals from the Solomon Islands government to provide adequate funds to address the problem. *Time* noted: “Only three government welfare workers can be called on to help the victims; they service a population of about 500,000 across a vast archipelago.” According to the UNICEF report, which was never publicly released, RAMSI personnel were seen “as contributing to an increase in prostitution”.

Howard’s appointment of Shane Castles to head his NT task force is particularly instructive. Castles’s term in the Solomon Islands was marked by a series of provocations, characterised by an open disregard for legal and constitutional norms and unflagging loyalty to the political imperatives of the Howard government.

Castles was initially dispatched to the Solomons as police chief in April 2005 in order to consolidate Canberra’s control amid mounting opposition to RAMSI. Twelve months later, RAMSI police sparked two days of rioting in Honiara after they fired tear gas into a political demonstration following national elections. The Australian police chief’s exact role in these events has never been officially investigated. But there is significant evidence that Australian forces were deliberately stood down during the riots in order to create maximum chaos, and to establish the conditions for the deployment of hundreds more troops and police to bolster the RAMSI operation. (See “The Howard government, RAMSI, and the April 2006 Solomon Islands’ riots”)

In the aftermath of the riots, the Sogavare government came to power and announced the formation of a Commission of Inquiry into the causes of the violence. Fearing an exposure of its role, the Howard government launched an extraordinary dirty tricks campaign aimed at demonising Sogavare and several of his supporters, and destabilising his government.

Castles was the key player. Last October, he arrested Julian Moti, a constitutional lawyer and Sogavare’s appointee to the position of attorney-general, who was responsible for setting up the Commission of Inquiry. Castles then proceeded to arrest Immigration Minister Peter Shanel and violently raided the office of Prime Minister Sogavare. The Australian police chief contemptuously dismissed a subsequent court ruling that acquitted Moti of the bogus charges, and threatened to arrest him again on the same charges. However, Sogavare sacked Castles and barred him from re-entering the Solomon Islands before he had a chance to do so. The Sogavare government concluded that Castles’s “continued presence here [is] considered prejudicial to the peace, defence, public safety, public order, public morality, security and good government of Solomon Islands”.

That Howard is involving Castles in his filthy NT operation should serve as a sharp warning of the methods being prepared, initially against the most oppressed and disadvantaged layers of Australian society, but, in the not-too-distant future, against the working class as a whole.



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