Labor, Liberal and the revival of colonialism in the South Pacific

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21 November 2007

Last Thursday's foreign policy debate between Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and his Labor counterpart, Robert McClelland, witnessed virtually the only mention, in the course of the six-week election campaign, of the Howard government's predatory activities in the South Pacific.

Referring to the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI)—the official title of Howard's military-police intervention force in the Solomons since 2003—Downer boasted it had been "a great success for Solomon Islands" and was "supported massively by the people of Solomon Islands". He then immediately went on to denounce Solomons Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare as "a great obstacle" to RAMSI and declared that Australia had to be tough in dealing with him.

Downer's none-too-subtle threat came amid new moves in Honiara for "regime change' and the ousting of Sogavare. Twelve Solomons MPs quit the government on November 11, accusing Sogavare of leading the country like a dictator and eroding its international image. Among the 12 were nine ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Toswell Kaua and sacked finance minister Gordon Darcy Lilo.

While there is no immediate evidence of direct Australian involvement, the Howard government is undoubtedly supportive, at the very least, of the latest efforts to destabilise the government. Canberra began targetting Sogavare shortly after his government came to power in May last year. Sogavare started calling for a RAMSI "exit strategy" and for wresting back control of public spending from RAMSI "advisers". Sogavare is trying to manouevre between Canberra and other, rival powers in the region: he wants to loosen RAMSI's grip over the country's administration and win financial support from other countries, while at the same time being careful not to oppose RAMSI outright.

The Howard government has responded with an extraordinary campaign, particularly against Solomons Attorney General Julian Moti. Demands have been made for Moti's extradition to face child sex charges in Australia, which were thrown out of a Vanuatu court in 1999. The campaign against Moti is especially aimed at discrediting an official inquiry into the causes of the April 2006 riots in the capital Honiara. There is already evidence that Australian officials deliberately allowed the unrest to escalate, in order to justify the dispatch of more police and troops to the islands.

Sogavare's political opponents unashamedly embrace RAMSI and accuse the government of undermining relations with Australia. Lilo, who until recently had been critical of the Australian occupying force, has done a complete about face. He now accuses Sogavare of harming the country's image. Opposition leader Fred Fono is pressing for a reconvening of parliament to put a no-confidence motion, claiming that the government no longer has a parliamentary majority. It seems that Sogavare has fended off the immediate challenge after winning back three MPs by giving them ministerial posts, but he has to reconvene parliament next month to bring down the budget.

There is no doubt that opposition efforts to oust Sogavare—assisted behind the scenes by Canberra—will continue. Howard and Downer have been particularly incensed by the Sogavare government's plans to review the Facilitation of International Assistance Act, which gives RAMSI wide-ranging powers and grants its personnel immunity from prosecution under Solomon Islands law. Denouncing Sogavare once again, Downer told Radio Australia last month: "If the Solomons does destroy RAMSI, one of the ways they could do it would be to remove those immunities. It could be catastrophic."

Downer's defence of the right of RAMSI officials to act with impunity underscores the neo-colonial character of the entire operation. Having bullied Honiara with economic and diplomatic threats into accepting RAMSI, the Howard government has installed Australian officials in key positions overseeing the police, prisons, the courts, finance and economic planning. The vast bulk of Australian "aid" has been used to fund this occupation force and various private Australian contractors, with virtually nothing going to desperately needed social services, such as public health and education.

The RAMSI operation is part of a far broader assertion of Australian imperialism's economic and strategic interests within the Asia Pacific region. With the backing of the Bush administration, the Howard government has also deployed military forces in East Timor and Tonga, installed Australian bureaucrats in senior posts in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and

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Fiji, and imposed an Australian official to head the South Pacific forum secretariat.

Canberra's bullyboy methods have generated resistance not only in the Solomons, but in other Pacific Island states. In recent comments to the *China Post*, academic Damien Kingsbury pointed to Downer's high-handed approach, saying: "The way he behaves towards some of the smaller regional governments is in direct contrast to the way he behaves in respect to larger countries. He has literally shouted down regional leaders in meetings." Significantly, the *China Post* is based in Taiwan, which is competing directly with China, and indirectly with Australia, for influence among Pacific Island states.

Prime Minister Howard has only been able to get away with these scandalous interventions because of the support extended to him by the entire political and media establishment, including the Labor Party and the Greens. Labor has backed the Howard government to the hilt, supporting the two military interventions in East Timor in 1999 and 2006 and the RAMSI operation in 2003, as well as direct Australian involvement in the administration of other Pacific countries. Labor leader Rudd calls for a limited withdrawal of Australian combat troops from Iraq—not because of any principled opposition to the US-led occupation of that country, but so that they can be used closer to home. Just as Howard regards the Pacific region as "Australia's backyard", Labor foreign affairs spokesman McClelland insists it is "Australia's arc of responsibility".

At the same time, reflecting criticisms in ruling circles of the government's abrasive methods, Labor is promising a more "cooperative" approach. Australia should be doing much better in the region, McClelland declared during the debate. "[We should] genuinely sit down in partnerships with them and develop programs in partnership with our neighbours," he said.

Far from calling for any pullback, however, Labor is pushing for even greater involvement. The party's policy argues for "a major revision of strategy" to deal with the "fragile states in our region" that could be "influenced by other countries that don't share Australia's interests". While not opposing Australian military interventions, Labor is critical of the government's over reliance on troops and improvised stop-gap methods, and calls for a more comprehensive strategy "backed up by better diplomatic and political resources".

In particular, Labor calls for the establishment of "an Asia Pacific Centre for Civil Military Cooperation" involving personnel from "the Australian Defence Force, Federal Police, AusAID, Department of Foreign Affairs, Emergency Management Australia, Department of Health and also non-government organisations". The centre would have a sweeping brief to enable "civil-military cooperation for the purposes of long term regional capacity building and governance" as well as "more short term challenges".

While Howard has held up RAMSI as its model, Labor insists that Australia's neo-colonial operations cannot rely on the brute force of soldiers and police alone. The Labor Party wants a more "sophisticated" approach, with appropriately trained Australian administrators, effective intelligence, the marshalling of academic resources, and the cultivation of a range of local "assets" in the Pacific countries that will all combine to more effectively prosecute Australian corporate and strategic interests throughout the region.

Neither Howard's nor Rudd's Pacific policy has anything to do with "helping friends" or preventing "terrorism" and crime, as the government tries to claim. Like every other part of the globe, the tiny island states of the South Pacific have become arenas for intensifying rivalry between the major powers. As well as being rich in resources, including oil and gas, the region has immense strategic significance. The Bush administration has backed the Howard government's activities as the means for countering growing Chinese influence, which could potentially create openings for a naval presence that would challenge the US predominance in the Pacific.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian troops from the Pacific. The working class in Australia has an overriding political responsibility to oppose any and all neo-colonial operations being conducted on behalf of Australian imperialism and to champion the basic rights of the workers and rural masses throughout the region. Only in this way can the unity be forged of all working people, in Australia, New Zealand and the entire Asia-Pacific region, against the capitalist profit system itself—which benefits the wealthy few at the expense of the vast majority.

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