

Former Australian prime minister feted by US Republican right

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25 March 2008

Until March 5, former Australian Prime Minister John Howard had avoided any interviews or public appearances after his humiliating electoral defeat in November last year, when he not only lost office, but his own parliamentary seat as well. Howard has now signaled that this was only a temporary state of affairs. He will continue to publicly advocate the policies with which his government was most associated—above all, its participation in the militarist US agenda being carried out in the name of the “war on terror”.

The venue for Howard’s first post-election speech was a presentation in Washington organised by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). The AEI is intimately associated with the Bush administration and the right wing of the Republican Party. More than 1,200 advocates of American militarism and social reaction assembled in Washington to watch Howard receive the Institute’s Irving Kristol Award and hear him deliver an hour-long address.

AEI president Christopher DeMuth introduced Howard as “this magnificent Australian”, while AEI Council of Academic Advisors chairman James Wilson hailed him as “a great friend of freedom”. The inscription on the crystal bowl award touted him as a “stalwart all-rounder of politics and policy, who made good government a popular cause and advanced Australia fair and free”. Howard is the first foreigner to receive the Irving Kristol Award.

Among those in attendance were Lynne Cheney, wife of Vice President Dick Cheney; former Deputy Defense Minister Paul Wolfowitz; former Bush ambassador to the UN John Bolton; and former Cheney aide Lewis “Scooter” Libby. Bush and Cheney did not turn up, but Howard was treated to a “family dinner” at the White House the following evening.

Howard’s speech on March 5 demonstrated why he is held in such high esteem by the scions of the Republican right. He invoked the “ongoing threat of Islamic fascism”

to justify the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and insisted on the need to continue the wars. He declared that “faith in multilateral institutions [such as the United Nations] to deal with such threats is misplaced”. The US and its allies, by implication, had to be prepared to launch further preemptive wars in defiance of international law and global opposition.

Howard stressed that he had “never resiled” from the 2003 decision to invade Iraq. Echoing the propaganda of the Bush administration, he hailed the illegal act of aggression as the basis for laying the foundations of a “democratic Iraq”, which “could still help to transform the Middle East”.

The former PM made no mention of the number of Iraqi deaths—estimated at 1.2 million—or the utter destruction of the country’s social fabric. Instead, he denounced the “left-liberal elements in the media... who apparently cannot bring themselves to acknowledge good news stories coming out of Baghdad”.

Britain, Poland and Australia were the only states that committed troops to participate in the US-led invasion. At the time, Howard justified the war exclusively on the basis of fabricated claims that Iraq had “weapons of mass destruction” and links to terrorism. In other words, he knowingly participated in a war crime, as did many in the audience applauding him.

Australia’s military contribution to the “shock-and-awe” devastation of Iraq was minimal—though its Special Air Service units are believed to have been the first invasion troops to initiate combat operations, at least 24 hours before the war was formally announced.

However, it was the political service that Howard rendered to the Bush administration, that was appreciated above all else. Following Howard’s contribution to the Afghan invasion, Australian involvement in the Iraq war enabled the White House to barrage its opponents with propaganda that the same Anglo-Saxon “democracies”

that had fought fascism in World War II were now united in confronting a new and equally dangerous threat. Howard's unflinching support was, and still is, used in the continuous campaign to disorientate the American people regarding the real motives of US militarism since September 11, 2001.

The agenda of the US ruling elite is aimed at dominating the key oil-producing regions of the globe—the Middle East and Central Asia—under conditions of rapidly mounting political conflicts and economic instability.

Howard's backing for the wars embodied the view within Australian ruling circles that the US-Australia alliance was crucial for maintaining Canberra's geo-political and economic influence in the South Pacific and South East Asia, against the rising influence of China and other powers. Australia's support has been repaid by ongoing US backing for Australian operations in East Timor, the Solomon Islands and other Pacific states, as well as with a free trade agreement.

During his AEI speech, Howard pointed to the significance that a "strategic partnership" with Japan would have to Australian interests in Asia. He said he could see "no reason" why "we should not seek to formalise that partnership" in a military alliance. By contrast, the former prime minister baldly stated that Australia "can never have the sort of intimate strategic relationship with China that we have with the United States because of the very different nature of the Chinese political system".

Underscoring the centrality of the US alliance to his political views, Howard declared that "the United States remains the ultimate guarantor of the way of life that most of us in the West wish to continue to enjoy".

Howard was referring to the "way of life" of a small financial and corporate elite and the upper middle classes, not the majority of the Australian population. His 11-year domestic agenda, built on the foundations of the free market policies introduced by Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, brought about a drastic rise in social inequality and poverty.

Howard openly boasted to his AEI audience of his government's socially retrogressive policies. He pointed to the introduction of a Goods and Services Tax, along with major cuts, which substantially benefitted upper income earners. He particularly praised his changes to labour legislation that have seen the massive growth of contract, casual and part-time work, stagnant or falling real wages and the erosion of working conditions and benefits.

Howard went on to hail his government's wholesale subsidisation of fee-charging religious schools, noting that it had "in practice, produced the same outcome as education vouchers". The public education system, by contrast, is in shambles. He also noted his "radical policy" of selling off the government-funded job placement agency and forcing the unemployed to seek services and welfare assistance from private companies, especially religious-based organisations such as the Salvation Army and Wesley Mission.

For all the references to "democracy" in Howard's speech, one of the legacies left by his government is the erection of the scaffolding of a police-state. Escalating social polarisation has been accompanied by unprecedented attacks on civil liberties. Forty pieces of legislation were introduced, in the name of fighting terrorism, that have given police agencies sweeping powers to spy on and suppress dissent of all kinds.

The conclusion of Howard's address was significant in one significant respect. While he is clearly bitter at losing power to his conservative party's rival, the Australian Labor Party, he was sufficiently objective to observe that "a number of the more socially conservative policies of my government have been endorsed by the new Australian government".

The Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is continuing all Howard's key measures, including the anti-terror laws and support for the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

For his part, Howard appears to have offered his services for the next few weeks as a well paid campaigner for Republican presidential candidate John McCain, whose views are most closely aligned with his own. He has signed up with the Washington Speakers Bureau and embarked on a speaking tour of the United States until at least mid-April, espousing positions similar to those he presented to the AEI. According to publicist Max Markson, cited in the Australian *Herald Sun* on March 12, he is being compensated to the tune of \$US50,000, plus travel and accommodation costs.



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