

In response to economic crisis, Australian government bolsters “national security”

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8 December 2008

After just over a year in office, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered what he termed an "historic" National Security Statement last Thursday, and appointed a former military general and SAS commander to the powerful new post of National Security Adviser.

Rudd's speech to parliament demonstrated that his government is in the same mould as the previous Howard administration, only more so, when it comes to making a militarist response to rising economic and social tensions in Australia and internationally.

The current prime minister declared that, in addition to traditional military activity, "national security" now encompasses counter-terrorism, prevention of refugee arrivals, maritime patrolling, dealing with "fragile states", climate change, dangers to "energy security" and all other perceived threats to "Australian interests both at home and abroad".

By elevating "national security" to an over-arching principle of politics, Rudd is extending his predecessor's invocation of the fraudulent "war on terror" to maintain a climate of fear and intimidation. Rudd's speech continued the tone he set in October, when he spoke of putting the country on a "war footing" to deal with the global economic meltdown.

In his latest statement, Rudd nominated "preserving Australia's cohesive and resilient society and the long-term strengths of our economy" as one of the linchpins of his government's new national security structure. While the language was deliberately vague, its thrust allows anyone who challenges government measures to be treated as a threat to economic and social "cohesion".

Echoing US President-elect Barack Obama, Rudd stated that "the first priority of government is the nation's security". This means not only aggressively pursuing Australian capitalism's interests globally as part of the US alliance—which Rudd described as "fundamental" to Australia's security—but also stifling domestic unrest as recession deepens, unemployment grows and social conditions deteriorate.

In an "increasingly complex and inter-connected" strategic environment, Rudd insisted, "the boundaries between international and domestic security issues are increasingly blurred". He added that regular national security statements would become as significant as annual national budget statements in setting the country's political and economic framework.

For the first time, a senior military officer will act as the nation's domestic security head. Ex-Major General Duncan Lewis, the new National Security Adviser, is a hardened frontline commander, having served for 30 years as an officer in the military, including three tours of overseas duty with the Special Air Services (SAS), the elite commando wing of the Australian Defence Force.

Lewis became SAS commanding officer, then commander of Australian and New Zealand forces in East Timor during 2000 and then—after leading the SAS again in the 2001-02 invasion of Afghanistan—the initial chief of the Special Forces Command (SFC). The SFC was established in 2002 as a new "fourth arm" of the military, together with the army, navy and air force, following the lead of the US and British forces.

At a December 2002 media conference, Lewis boasted that US President Bush had praised the Australian SAS's contribution to the "war against terror" in Afghanistan.

Lewis commented: "Our troops have been engaged in a deadly serious business for the last year, and proven again that they're well-trained and well-equipped and well-suited to this type of operation". While highly secretive, the SAS is known to have engaged in long-range reconnaissance and assassination, in some cases involving serious civilian casualties (See: "New evidence confirms killing of Afghan villagers by Australian soldiers").

When Lewis retired from the military in 2005, Howard appointed him to a high-level government post, heading the National Security Division of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. In another display of bipartisan continuity, Rudd has now promoted Lewis as one of the two joint heads of the prime ministerial department. Lewis also co-chairs the National Counter-Terrorism Committee and a host of other security agencies.

Like Howard too, Rudd has seized upon an overseas terrorist atrocity, this time in Mumbai, as a pretext for further bolstering what Rudd called "the national security community"—which includes the Australian Federal Police (AFP) and the primary internal intelligence service, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

These agencies have become notorious over the past seven years for the abuse of democratic rights, including those perpetrated against David Hicks, Mamdouh Habib, Mohamed Haneef and Izhar Ul-Haque. Among other things, the AFP and ASIO were implicated in torture, detention without trial and denial of basic legal rights. Far from holding them to account, which would also require indicting the ministers in the Howard government who directed their activities, the Rudd government is once again boosting their powers and resources.

According to leaked reports in the Murdoch and Fairfax press, Rudd's speech was re-focussed in the wake of the Indian events. Rudd said the attacks showed that "extremism leading to violence or terrorism" would pose a "serious ongoing threat for the foreseeable future". Describing the role of the Australian security and law enforcement agencies as "critical," Rudd said his government was committed to ensuring they were "resourced appropriately".

While dropping plans for a US-style Department of Homeland Security, the prime minister foreshadowed the

formation of no less than five new agencies—the National Intelligence Coordination Committee (NICC) to be chaired by Lewis, a Crisis Coordination Centre (CCC), the Office of National Security (ONS), a National Security College (NSC) and a re-tasked and re-named Australian Customs and Border Protection Service.

Somewhat nervously, Rudd's speech acknowledged the potential for destabilising conflicts between the US—"Australia's closest ally"—and China, and the emergence of tensions with Japan and India. "While the likelihood of conflict between the major powers is currently low, their interactions will largely shape the international order in which Australia must operate," he said.

While the Labor government is still clinging to the US, on which Australia has relied militarily since World War II, it is conscious of the precipitous decline in US economic and strategic power, as well as local capitalism's heavy dependence on Asian markets and the acute dangers associated with the global financial crisis.

More is yet to come in a series of reports and White Papers to be released next year, on counter-terrorism, defence, foreign policy and national energy security. But Rudd's national security statement has already underscored the government's militarist preparations for a new period of global turmoil and domestic unrest.



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