

# Australia: Former public servant condemns Iraq war lies

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A former senior public servant, Margaret Swieringa, has condemned a speech given last week by former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, in which he attempted to justify his government's commitment of Australian military forces to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Swieringa wrote in an opinion piece in last Friday's *Canberra Times* and *Sydney Morning Herald* that Howard's speech "obfuscates some issues", that "none" of his government's arguments in 2003 were true and that his reference to the findings of a parliamentary inquiry into the Iraq war was "misleading".

From 2002 to 2007, Swieringa served as the secretary of a parliamentary intelligence committee, made up of seven Liberal and Labor party senators. On March 1, 2004, the committee presented a report on what intelligence had existed before the invasion that substantiated the Howard government's claims that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein possessed "weapons of mass destruction".

Together with the Bush administration and the Blair government in Britain, the Howard government waged a frenzied propaganda campaign throughout 2002 and into 2003 to justify a pre-emptive war—without the sanction of the United Nations and in defiance of international law—on the grounds that Iraq posed an immediate threat. In hysterical terms, representatives of the "coalition of the willing" alleged that they had irrefutable evidence that Iraq had WMD stockpiles, was seeking to acquire nuclear weapons and was forging ties with international terrorist organisations. The Howard government's involvement provided critical political and diplomatic support to the criminal war mounted by Washington.

In the aftermath of the invasion, no evidence of WMDs, nuclear programs or ties with terrorism were found by the US-led occupation forces in Iraq. A decade after the invasion, Howard was asked to address the Lowy Institute for International Policy on April 9 to mark the anniversary. Swieringa has apparently spoken out because

his speech amounted to a shameless defence of his actions.

Howard maintained that all the intelligence available to the aggressor nations supported their pre-war propaganda. He declared that "the belief that Saddam had WMDs was near universal," with the Bush administration and the Democratic Party leaders united in the conviction that the Hussein regime, if not removed from power, would provide terrorists with weapons to launch attacks on American soil.

Howard further defended his backing for a pre-emptive war by citing the positions of the opposition Labor Party, which had made clear it would support Australian involvement, providing the UN Security Council passed a resolution sanctioning it. He quoted the then Labor Party foreign affairs spokesman, and later prime minister, Kevin Rudd. Rudd, no less than Howard and his ministers, had propagated the US accusations against Iraq. He told the State Zionist Council of Victoria on October 15, 2002: "Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction ... That is a matter of empirical fact."

Howard's insistence that the existence of WMDs in Iraq was accepted as fact before the invasion is a gross historical falsification. It was accepted only by those, the Howard government and Labor opposition alike, who were seeking to rationalise their embrace of an illegal invasion. For years before the war, people such as former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter had thoroughly documented the case that Iraq did not have a WMD program.

In the months leading up to the March 2003 invasion, millions of people around the world accessed the reams of material that exposed the crude fabrications that were being used to justify war. The *World Socialist Web Site* published article after article documenting the "litany of lies" being told by the Bush administration and its allies. On February 6, 2003, the WSWS published a withering

exposure of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the UN in which he attempted to substantiate the WMD claims. The article labelled the speech "the latest act in a diplomatic charade laced with cynicism and deceit" and thoroughly answered, with readily available information, all Powell's assertions (see: "Powell's UN speech triggers countdown to war against Iraq").

On the weekend of February 15-17, 2003, the largest antiwar demonstrations in history took place around the world, with over 10 million people marching to denounce the looming invasion. Millions of people rejected the false claims of governments, and many understood that the real motive for the war was US imperialist plans to seize oil-rich Iraq and increase its domination over the entire Middle East.

Swieringa responded to Howard's speech by stating that the parliamentary inquiry had concluded that the Australian intelligence agencies had warned Howard's cabinet that the WMD claims were not substantiated by any evidence. She also noted: "The reason there was so much argument about the existence of such weapons ... was that to go to war on any pretext would have been a breach of international law."

Listing 11 findings of the committee, Swieringa said it had found that "the scale of threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was less than it had been a decade earlier" and it had no nuclear weapons, no ballistic missiles that could reach the US, and no known chemical or biological weapons production.

In actual fact, the parliamentary committee actually carried out a whitewash on Howard's behalf. While raising some questions about the intelligence, it also cited the reports provided after September 2002 by the Office of National Assessments (ONA), which, after previously dismissing any WMD threat, began asserting that the existence of WMD was "highly likely".

Just days before the invasion, ONA officer Andrew Wilkie had publicly resigned in protest over what he claimed were exaggerations. On the parliamentary committee, however, the Labor senators joined their Liberal colleagues in denying any political manipulation, exonerating the government and diverting the public outrage over the WMD lies by calling for an inquiry into the supposedly flawed intelligence—an inquiry designed to further boost the resources and powers of the intelligence agencies.

Similar exercises in political damage control were carried out in the US and Britain. Official inquiries

declared that the WMD claims resulted from "intelligence failures"—not conscious lies to justify an illegal war. Not a single political or military figure responsible for the war of aggression, which resulted in the deaths of over one million Iraqis, has been held accountable.

The shift in advice by the ONA—a body that reports directly to the prime minister's office—was bound up with the real motive for Australia's involvement in the war, which Howard openly raised at the conclusion of his speech last week. He told the Lowy Institute: "[A] powerful element in our decision to join the Americans was, of course, the depth and character of our relationship with the US.... In my view, the circumstances we recall tonight necessitated a 100 percent ally."

In other words, the rhetoric over WMDs was the propaganda screen behind which the mercenary decision was made to participate in a war of aggression because of the US-Australia military alliance and to ensure ongoing US backing for Australian imperialist interests in the Asia-Pacific region. The cover up for Howard's government by the parliamentary committee stemmed from the agreement with this perspective by the entire political establishment, above all the Labor Party (see: "Howard government exonerated despite proof of lies").

The alignment with Washington has only intensified subsequently, with the Gillard Labor government fully integrating Australia into the Obama administration's aggressive "pivot" in Asia against China, and offering up Australian territory as the base of operations for the US military. A decade after Iraq, far greater crimes are being prepared that potentially involve Australia in a catastrophic US-led war against China.



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