

Australia: Ex-military chief appointed governor-general

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott yesterday announced that former defence force chief Peter Cosgrove will become Australia's next governor-general, effectively making him the country's head of state, formally representing the British Queen.

Far from being a purely ceremonial post, the governor-generalship serves critical ideological purposes for the ruling elite and also carries with it powers to command the armed forces and intervene in constitutional crises, including to dismiss an elected government.

Although the installation of a military figure into the post is not unprecedented—Cosgrove is the third since World War II—his appointment sends a definite political message. First and foremost, it is bound up with the Abbott government's plans for a four-year celebration of the centenary of World War I.

Cosgrove is regarded by the political and media establishment as the ideal figurehead for an unprecedented barrage of patriotic pro-war propaganda. This is designed not only to justify the 1914–18 catastrophe, but to whip up militarist sentiment amid preparations for new imperialist wars.

Standing alongside Abbott at yesterday's media announcement, Cosgrove declared: "We all note that the centenary of World War I commemorations will soon be upon us and I have no doubt that these indeed will be a special part of our social landscape over that period."

The Abbott government's proposed "peoples' celebration" of the war, initially devised by the previous Labor government, will commemorate virtually every battle that Australian forces undertook in that conflagration, as part of the British Empire, from the seizure of German New Guinea in 1914 to the disastrous attack on the Turkish Gallipoli peninsula in 1915 and the fratricidal trench warfare on the Western Front in France and Belgium from 1916 to 1918.

This extraordinary celebration of war can be explained

only by the fact that the Abbott government, like its Labor predecessor, has committed itself to the preparations for war being made by US imperialism against China, aimed at preventing any challenge of its domination of the Indo-Pacific region.

Intensive efforts are being made in the media to portray Cosgrove as a popular figure, even an "ordinary bloke" with a "common touch." The truth is that Cosgrove is a highly political figure, with impeccable connections in the corporate as well as the military corridors of power.

A Vietnam War veteran, commander of the Australian-led intervention into East Timor in 1999, and Chief of the Defence Force from 2002 to 2005, he has a record of unconditionally supporting the US alliance, leading the Australian participation in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and publicly advocating increased military spending.

Selected to deliver the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's flagship Boyer lecture series in 2009, Cosgrove declared that the most "durable" character of Australia's security policy was that it was "a profound and engaged ally of the United States (and implicitly that fact accepts the risks as well as the advantages of alliance)."

After retiring from active duty in 2005, Cosgrove was rewarded for his 40-year military service with lucrative directorships of a number of major companies, notably Qantas and APN News & Media, as well as consultancies, including for financial services firm Deloitte. On the Qantas board, he was party to the relentless corporate restructuring that destroyed thousands of workers' jobs.

Cosgrove enjoys unanimous backing throughout the parliamentary establishment, with Labor leaders outbidding their government colleagues in lionising him. "General Cosgrove reflects the best of Australia and its people," acting Labor leader Tanya Plibersek stated. "He has dedicated his entire adult life to serving his country,

inspiring others with his determination, strength and leadership.”

The reality is that Cosgrove was initially elevated to prominence after storming Vietcong bunkers and killing their occupants during the US-led occupation of Vietnam. For that he was awarded one of the Australian armed forces’ top awards—the Military Cross—in 1969.

On the basis of this reputation, in 1999 the Howard government made Cosgrove commander of the East Timor operation. Under the cover of a “humanitarian” exercise to protect the Timorese people, the intervention provided a pivotal post-Vietnam War precedent for military troops to be dispatched to pursue Australian capitalism’s predatory interests, including in the Timor Sea’s oil and gas fields. The Timor operation, which was backed by the pseudo-left groups, was seen as ending the “Vietnam syndrome” left by the mass hostility that developed to the deployment of the military as a result of the Vietnam War.

Having personified that shift, Cosgrove was rapidly promoted to lead the army and then the entire armed forces during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, making him a central figure in the lies, fabrications and war crimes of those operations. Despite the exposure of the “weapons of mass destruction” fraud used as the pretext to invade Iraq, Cosgrove vehemently denied that any deliberate deception was involved.

In a 2009 interview, Cosgrove noted the military’s escalated role since the East Timor intervention. “Before the Howard period, we [the Australian Defence Force] were, if you like, seen in traditional terms—turning out on Anzac Day—but from 1999 onwards we came to the front of mind as an ever-present arm of government doing all kinds of things,” he said. “We were in East Timor, Solomon Islands, responses post-Bali, post-tsunami, you name it and the ADF would be involved. It became an ever-present institution, a vigorous arm of government and with that went money and resources.”

This “ever-present” engagement was not confined to foreign deployments. The military was increasingly mobilised internally as well, including for the Northern Territory intervention against Aboriginal communities, security at major political and sporting events, and disaster relief operations.

As governor-general, Cosgrove will have access to potentially dictatorial powers to intervene domestically in the event of a political crisis. The colonial-era Australian Constitution, written in 1901, deliberately preserved the power of the vice-regal representative to direct the

military, as the commander in chief of the armed forces, and to exercise the undefined “reserve powers” of the monarchy.

During the Canberra coup of 1975, when Governor-General Sir John Kerr dismissed the Whitlam government, he invoked these powers to conduct his own briefings with military generals and to place the armed forces on alert to deal with popular opposition. An active CIA-backed campaign of destabilisation had been mounted against Whitlam, driven by fears of regional instability in the wake of the US defeat in Vietnam and by concerns that the Labor government had failed to contain an eruption of wage demands and militancy in the Australian working class.

Today, the social and political tensions are even more acute, both in Australia and globally, driven by the ongoing economic breakdown, worsening unemployment and social inequality, rising militarism and the collapse of support for the existing political parties.

At his media conference with Abbott, Cosgrove declared that he would avoid political involvement. But he described his elevation to the role as a “salute” to members of the defence force, and said he intended to visit various military bases during his term. Abbott too hinted at a more than symbolic role for Cosgrove, noting that the governor-general’s task “as representative of the Crown,” is “to provide leadership beyond politics,” a duty that Cosgrove would carry out “with vigour and integrity.”

These are further indications that Cosgrove has been installed for definite political reasons, both to embody the “celebration” of war and to prepare to deal with the anticipated development of social and political unrest.



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