

8. In whose interest?

In whose interest does John Howard work?

If he were running his own small business, he would be free to wheel and deal with whomever he chose, as long as he did not break the law. However, the Australian people voted for Howard as their prime minister, to serve the people of Australia. In his prime ministerial oath he stated: ‘I, John Winston Howard, do swear that I will well and truly serve the people of Australia, in the Office of Prime Minister.’¹

In the previous pages, we have seen John Howard serving his own interests and certain other special interests, to the neglect of the Australian people.

Whose interests are being served by Australia's involvement in the occupation of Iraq and the War on Terror?

The course of Australia's involvement in the Iraq war suggests that, in supporting the United States in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, Howard was representing the interests of the United States rather than the interests of the Australian people—70 per cent of whom were against the war, according to opinion polls.

Australia's involvement in the war has made us less secure and has increased the threat of terrorism within our own country. In his decision to go to war, Howard's support for the Bush administration was more important to him than the expressed values of the Australian people.

The position of serious commentators is, moreover, that the best way for Australia to fight terrorism is to join the international effort in Afghanistan, to pursue police and intelligence operations, and to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Howard has shown

that his is not up to the task of advancing Australian's interests by taking steps to prevent nuclear terrorism.

Whose interests are being served by the politics of division?

Howard and his conservative colleagues have moved away from the position of previous Australian government leaders when it comes to supporting vulnerable minority groups within society. Instead of actively promoting the policies and values of multiculturalism and reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians, Howard and the conservatives have employed the politics of division. Howard's campaign team has used market research tools to identify and magnify people's deep-seated fears that their rights will be threatened by minority groups. This has been done purely in order to win votes.

This government is determined to preserve its own power regardless of the damage to Australia's social cohesion. Australian voters must decide whether to continue down this path, to re-elect a government that promotes division within our community by stereotyping and denigrating vulnerable minority groups in order to win elections.

Whose interests are being served by Howard's approach to economic management?

Howard has been responsible for some significant economic initiatives, such as introduction of the GST. His greatest achievement in this area, though, has been political, in winning the battle on public perceptions of economic management.

The shortcoming of his economic management, demonstrated in areas such as housing affordability, point to a government more concerned with helping investors and speculators make windfall capital gains than with families wishing to buy a home.

By his failure to grasp the importance of renewable energy, Howard has done untold damage to our earlier capacity to lead the new industrial revolution as the entire world adapts to a carbon-constrained economy. The interests of Liberal Party fundraisers and investors have

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blinded him to this aspect of the nation's economic potential, which he has squandered.

His economic fundamentalism fails to recognise the value of assets such as pensioner dental health or riches of the environment such as clean water, a stable climate, productive soil and our forests. Blind to these assets, he allows our social and natural wealth, our common wealth, to be plundered in the name big bucks for the rich.

Whose interests are being served by the Howard government's management of the environment?

The greatest failure of the Howard government has been its planning. Instead of bringing together leading Australian experts to work on plans for environmental protection and climate change, the conservatives' approach has been to bring together political appointees to work on behalf of their own key investors.

When a government hands its responsibilities for environmental policy to representatives of the coal, oil, cement, aluminium and mining industries, it is clear whom that government is serving. It is not the public interest.

Whose interests are being served by Howard's border protection policies?

Howard won an election by making a lot of noise about protecting our borders from homeless refugees while at the same time signing an agreement that dropped border protection against corrupt American capitalism.

The Howard government betrayed Australia's interests when it weakened our quarantine laws and thereby assisted the United States farm lobby.

Summary

The Howard government has deserted Australia's traditional democratic mode of capitalism where the government's first priority is the public interest.

Instead, Howard has given priority to his favourite private interests, to the Bush administration and to his own self-interest. He is leading us towards the model of corrupt American-style capitalism, where government follows the wishes of special interests, the rich and powerful, and not the people.

What other evidence is there for this theory?

Acceptance of torture

Howard is too smart to say he approves of torture. However, his government has demonstrated its acceptance of torture in its failure to protest against these crimes where they are exposed or against the Bush administration's abandonment of the Geneva Convention. Australia makes herself complicit in these wrongs by loyally supporting the United States' torture policy in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay and Iraq.

Both Australia and the United States have signed the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 7 of that Covenant states that:

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.²

By 2005, it had become clear that the United States was not only torturing prisoners but also kidnapping suspects in one country and taking them to another for interrogation and torture (so called 'extraordinary rendition'). Most Americans were appalled.

George Bush's actions seemed to be undermining the rule of law. This was to be subsequently confirmed by the United States Supreme Court. In November 2001, George Bush had issued a military order to set up military commissions in order to establish Guantanamo Bay outside the United States rule of law.

When this order was tested in the United States Supreme Court in 2006, the president's actions were declared illegal in what is known as the Hamdan Decision. In making this decision, the court upheld the United States Constitution, which states that international treaties signed by the United States become federal law. The court concluded

that United States law required the Bush administration to follow the Geneva Convention.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that:

The real blockbuster in the Hamdan decision is the court's holding that Common Article 3 of the Geneva Convention applies to the conflict with Al Qaeda, a holding that makes high-ranking Bush administration officials potentially subject to prosecution under the federal War Crimes Act.³

Article 3 of the Convention relates to the humane treatment of prisoners of war. In other words, the Hamdan Decision confirms that the United States administration is obliged, by its own law, to treat al-Qa'ida suspects as prisoners of war. Article 3 prohibits:

- (a) violence to life and person, in particular murder of all kinds, mutilation, cruel treatment and torture ...
- (c) outrages upon personal dignity, in particular humiliating and degrading treatment;
- (d) the passing of sentences and the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court, affording all the judicial guarantees which are recognized as indispensable by civilized peoples.⁴

With the Howard government's *National Security Information (Criminal and Civil Proceedings) Act 2004*, the door was opened to the use of information gained under torture in prosecuting a person in Australia. In 2006, prominent Queens Council, Julian Burnside, wrote:

in cases where people are charged with terrorist offences, confessions may be received but evidence that torture or other improper practices were used to obtain the confession may be excluded, in the name of national security.⁵

In his anti-terrorism law, Howard has bypassed the UN prohibition on torture, and appears to condone the horrors of torture chambers, once the exclusive domain of the police state. Australians have never demonstrated that they want a government that supports torture. They do not want a government that remains silent as its closest ally flouts international law.

Through his silence on torture Howard shows he lacks the courage to represent the national interest when it involves taking a stand that is at odds with that of the Bush administration. This is exemplified in his weakness in representing the interests of David Hicks, who endured five years of inhumane treatment in Guantanamo Bay before facing a Military Commission that had been condemned by the legal fraternity around the world, including the UK House of Lords. Instead of protesting the treatment of one of its citizens, the Howard government defended the Bush administration's abuse of its own legal system and international law.

Howard investors

Howard is full of praise for the way business and politics work so closely together in the United States. In his excessive enthusiasm to follow America, he has jettisoned many of the practices and protections of our Australian systems.

United States politicians are dependent on business contributions in order to raise the millions of dollars needed for each campaign. Business 'investment' in politicians is well rewarded. The return on investment compares very favourably with all other investments. In Australia, such investment is called corruption. Australian and British politicians are prohibited from selling favours. However, Howard seems to be willing to push the boundaries.

A good example can be found in the relationship between Howard and Dick Honan, a generous Liberal Party donor, recipient of Howard's favours, and owner and chairman of the Manildra Group, the largest user of wheat for industrial purposes in Australia. The relationship was supposed to be hush-hush, but when Tasmanian Senator, Kerry O'Brien, pursued the matter using the Freedom of Information Act, he found a smoking gun.

It is reported⁶ that Howard met with Dick Honan on 1 August 2002 to 'discuss business'. Then Howard lied three times about having done so. Over the following year, the government on three occasions

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promised to provide the Senate with documents about that meeting and failed to do so. Why might the prime minister lie about a meeting with a businessman and then withhold information about that meeting?

Honan's Manildra Group has developed a near monopoly on ethanol production in Australia. Ethanol is an alternative fuel, an additive to petrol for cars.

The Freedom of Information request turned up a letter from Honan to Howard in August 2002 expressing concerns about the expected arrival of a Brazilian ship carrying 13.9 million litres of cheap ethanol from Brazil. He expressed concern that such cheap imports would destroy the future of renewable fuels in Australia.

Two weeks later, the government introduced an ethanol subsidy scheme and forced the Brazilian ship to turn around without delivering its cargo. In the first ten months of the ethanol subsidy scheme, the Manildra Group received 96 per cent (\$20.8 million) of the total subsidy paid to the industry. According to returns to the Australian Electoral Commission, Manildra contributed \$694,970 to the coalition parties in the years prior to the decision. Most of that money was given after July 2001 and before the Cabinet decision on ethanol in September 2002.⁷

Investment advisors would agree; an investment of \$694,970 for a gain of \$20.8 million in less than a year is a fantastic return. The losers are the Australian taxpayers and the credibility of our political system.

Only a judicial enquiry could determine whether this was corruption or coincidence. At the very least, it seems that Howard operates with bold disregard for conflicts of interest. This is one of the great dangers when people with great power are not held to account.

Instead of upholding his oath of office, Howard is behaving like a representative of the companies he supports. Perhaps his years in power have given him a sense of entitlement, with the arrogance that goes with it; he certainly doesn't behave like the even-handed statesman we need, representing the people of Australia.

Privatised government chief scientist

The role of the chief scientist is to provide the government with independent advice. The scientific community was staggered at Howard's boldness in appointing Rio Tinto's chief technologist for coal and aluminium, Dr Robin Batterham, as chief scientist for the Australian government.

When Howard invites 'other' interests to lead government decision-making, we should not be surprised that their private interests predominate over the public interest. When senior government roles can be privatised without challenge, then something is wrong with our democracy.

Privatised public information

In February 2007 the CSIRO revealed that private interests had the power to withhold some documents produced by the Cooperative Research Centre for Coal and Sustainable Development.⁸ This taxpayer-funded research centre was established to bring the best expertise together from research institutes and the business sector. But an investment in the centre from Big Coal gave it the leverage to suppress a report damning of carbon capture and storage. Carbon capture is the coal industry's key argument for its continued right to exist. Further, government policy on greenhouse issues is crucially tied to this unproven carbon-capture technology. It's not hard to join the dots that lead to the unfavourable report being canned.

If ever information was in the public interest, this is. Giving 'interested parties' the power to withhold negative findings is anti-democratic. How can people exercise their democratic rights when information unfavourable to the government is withheld?

The Howard government seems to be leading the attack on our democracy.

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Conclusion

With such an accumulation of evidence, it is hard to escape the conclusion that we have a prime minister who lacks the courage required to stand up for the national interest and who has repeatedly broken his oath of office in favour of his 'other' interests.