

Mr Howard's Australia

By Fred Halliday,
Created 2005-03-03 00:00

After the long post-Christmas summer holiday that stretches through January, the Australian parliament, housed in a fine modernist building with soaring arches and columns, reconvenes in the second week of February. On its first day back, the prime minister, John Howard – fresh from his Liberal Party's fourth successive federal election victory [1] in October 2004 – appears confident, even somewhat condescending, as he swivels in his ministerial chair in front of the despatch box.

Howard, a tough politician with a sharp tongue and good instincts for the popular mood, was once thought of as a failed candidate. But he has presided, in domestic and foreign policy, over a significant reorientation of the country, away from the more liberal and multicultural attitudes of the 1980s and early 1990s. The shift brings Australia closer at once to the values and aspirations of the “White Australia” of the post-war, Robert Menzies [2] era and to the worldview of the contemporary United States of America. In current European terms, by combining domestic conservatism and pro-American foreign policy to secure election victory, Howard is following the Danish [3] path rather than its opposite, the Spanish [3].

Across from Howard rises the portentous figure of the new leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), more correctly a former (1996-2001) leader, Kim Beazley. Beazley [4] is a large, red-faced character brought back to fill the vacancy following the sudden, and eccentric, disappearance from office and public view of its previous figurehead, Mark Latham. Latham [5] had hoped to give Labor a new, sharper edge but he failed to connect with the public and led his party to a larger defeat than almost anyone, friend or foe, had anticipated. At 43 his career ended abruptly – “from rooster to feather duster in one night” as a laconic local journalist put it on a breakfast radio show.

Fred Halliday's incisive analyses of world politics, terrorism, and the middle east appear regularly in **openDemocracy**:

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“Bush's triumph: three ends and a beginning” (November 2004 [5])

“Turkey and the hypocrisies of Europe” (December 2004 [5])

“Terrorism and world politics: conditions and prospects” (January 2005 [5])

The issues of this first parliamentary exchange after the recess give a taste of Australia [6] today: homage by both party leaders to two Australians killed (this a very rare event) in action abroad, a policeman in the Solomon Islands and a member of a British SAS team whose Hercules C-130 transport plane was shot down in Iraq; dispute over a mentally-ill former air hostess detained for months in cruel conditions; questions about policy on Iraq to the foreign minister, Alexander Downer [7]; questions about taxation plans and future expenditure on infrastructure to the federal treasurer, Peter Costello, a brash character believed to harbour prime ministerial ambitions.

Howard's authority [7] rests both on his economic record, which has moved Australia from fifteenth to tenth in global per capita income, and on his instinct for judging the changed public mood on issues of concern and sensitivity. His success – his approval rating in January [8] was 67% – and Labor's disarray speaks to a country that has over the past decade substantially departed from the course set during the years of ALP rule under Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, and Paul Keating.

In that era, Australia sought in both foreign and domestic policy to redefine what was meant by its self-celebratory designation, "the lucky country". Abroad, it built political, economic and cultural links with Asia, and Australia moved away from its previous close alliance with the US. Under its foreign minister, Gareth Evans [9], Australia played an important part in building new associations of third-world countries and in the Cambodia peace process. At home, ALP governments committed themselves to supporting immigration from Asia, to building a multicultural Australia, and to finding a more just and supportive accommodation with the country's Aboriginal people.

Much of Australian society responded. Sydney became a multiethnic city, with new fashions in cuisine, housing design, and lifestyle. The country's image came to be defined less by the doughty cricketers of earlier decades and more by its cosmopolitan and intellectually critical authors, among them exiles who found fresh inspiration in their homeland's transformation: novelists Patrick White, Peter Carey, CJ Koch, and Thomas Keneally [10], historian Henry Reynolds [11], the feminist Germaine Greer [12], the art historian Robert Hughes, the leftwing author John Pilger [13], and the critic Clive James.

That began to change in the 1990s. There had always been a brash streak in Australia's image, exemplified in Foster's beer adverts and the seamless banalities of its soap operas (and, occasionally, its cricketers). As in other developed countries, but with an added rawness born of the country's large open coastline and geopolitical position in Asia, opinion turned on the issue of immigration.

Successive ALP governments moved far from the "white-only" policy of the post-1945 period, and confidently embraced the prospect of a multicultural [13] Australia infused by immigrants and refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and other Asian countries. John Howard has not reverted to the earlier model, but he – and his hardline interior minister, Philip Ruddock – have made much of being tougher on immigration; the punitive treatment meted out to a boatload of Afghan would-be asylum-seekers [13] stuck off the coast of Western Australia in 1999 is seen by many as pivotal in helping Howard to his second federal election victory. (It is a measure of his immigration policy's impact that the new British policy is, in some degree, modelled [13] on that of Canberra).

The other, and related issue (insofar as it also concerns Australia's identity as a multicultural nation) that has helped move the country to the right is the Aboriginal question. After years of social and legal advance, the cause of Australia's first people has gone backwards [14], particularly with the rejection of claims to compensation for land appropriations. Public opinion

can be aroused by official revelations of past abductions for genetic reasons of Aboriginal children deemed capable of “passing” as white, but its sympathy is short for Aboriginal campaigns for redress. This stern approach is insistently advocated in newspapers owned [14] by Australia’s most powerful ideological figure, Rupert Murdoch, and “revisionist” historians like Keith Windschuttle.

These trends in government policy have been accompanied by a rise in nationalist culture, evident in the renewed interest in Anzac Day, the commemoration of the bloody attempt [15] to land Australian and New Zealand troops on the Turkish coast at Gallipoli in 1915: sons and grandsons now march in Anzac parades wearing their forebears’ war medals. The message of Gallipoli, relayed in Peter Weir’s film [16] and many other accounts, lends itself to multiple modern associations – Australian heroism, a Muslim enemy and a catastrophic blunder by arrogant and upper-class British commanding officers.

This domestic shift has coincided with a change in attitudes to the outside world. The emergence of militant Islamism in Indonesia [16] (evidenced in the 2002 bombing in Bali [16], a favourite Australian holiday destination), of insurrection in southern Thailand, and of militant religious and nationalist trends in Malaysia combine to lessen the wish to integrate with east Asia. Symptomatically, interest in Asian languages and Indonesian studies has declined dramatically in Australian universities. Yet Australia is only too aware of the rise of China, which has replaced Japan as the primary Asian strategic foe – not least as Howard has been treated as a marginal figure in recent Asian summit meetings. This is one issue on which Canberra does not follow the American line: Alexander Downer declared [17] on a visit to China in August 2004 that, in the event of a conflict with Taiwan, Australia would not be drawn in.

The paradox of Australia [18] – a continental country largely made up of desert, and with a population now of only 20 million – is its combination of isolation and fear. One result of its sense of great distance from its natural allies in Europe and the US, and its persistent nervous awareness of its giant Asian neighbours to the north (fuelled by memories of Japanese advances into Indonesia, and the bombing of Darwin, in the Pacific war) is a feeling of vulnerability. The frequent infernos that can extend right into its cities’ suburbs – the hills around Canberra are bare as a result of forest fires two years ago – add to this a modern, environmental dimension.

By contrast, its 4-million strong neighbour to the southeast [19], New Zealand, exudes no such vulnerability – because it is even further away. The first country in the world to give women the vote, with its exceptionally open interaction between its *pakeha* (white) and indigenous Maori populations, with its social and political traditions of Scandinavian liberality, has been able in its foreign and defence policies [20] consistently to challenge the United States.

The two countries, in short, are more than a three-hour flight apart. Howard has little time for New Zealand’s socialist and liberal values; like Rupert Murdoch, he promotes what is, in effect, the Americanisation of Australia’s public life. The sun may well be shining this summer, but the “lucky country” is not quite as content as it would like to appear.

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