

Howard's way

By Tom Burgis,
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It is a surprise, to say the least, that [John Howard](#) [1] scoops December's Bad Democracy award. A ruthless campaign of intimidation could not persuade **openDemocracy** readers to vote for Robert Mugabe; nor did they crack during five days up to their necks in effluence in a CIA dungeon. Nicolas Sarkozy has reportedly labelled our dear readers "scum", Islam Karimov has denied that the vote ever took place, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has called for Clerkenwell to be wiped from the map.

Even more astonishing is the margin of the Australian [prime minister's](#) [2] victory. His 611 votes are more than ten times the ballots for Mr Karimov, a man who massacres his own people. A suggested New Year's resolution for **openDemocracy**: attract more Uzbek readers! In second place with 115 votes was the Agency, after a month in which it emerged that it is probably responsible for the horrors of "extraordinary rendition".

Click [here](#) [2] to view this month's list of bad democrat's, and cast your vote today

Howard seems the petty shoplifter beside Mugabe's homicidal maniac. He has been [elected](#) [3] – often overwhelmingly – four times and in March 2006 will have served the Australian people as premier for ten years. He has, by and large, shown respect for the pillars of parliamentary democracy. Why is it that he has joined [Silvio Berlusconi](#) [4] in the hallowed archives of undemocratic greatness?

Howard is no saint. And this result would suggest that assaults on democracy are relative – those in Harare's bulldozed slums might apply different parameters to those surveying the prime ministerial record from Bondi Beach.

In recent months, Howard has [rampaged](#) [5] through much of the territory dear to liberal Australia. He has deregulated the labour market, savaged the welfare state and tabled [anti-terrorism legislation](#) [6] so draconian that activists in Australia are frantically contacting the family of [Jean Charles de Menezes](#) [7] to rally opposition. This [petition](#) [8] puts the case starkly. The measures include a shoot-to-kill policy and indefinite detention of terror suspects with no judicial oversight.

One Australian reader, who declines to be named, says Howard's legislative onslaught of late has been "despotic", identifying Howard's principal tools of government as "fear and urgency" and observing that Australia "is not a good place to be right now."

It is certainly not a good place to be if you happen to be any colour other than bronzed. Of course, Howard was not among the thugs who went [immigrant-bashing](#) [9] in Sydney's suburbs last month. But nor is he any friend of destitute Asians seeking asylum. In 2001, he ordered troops to storm the [Tampa](#) [10], a cargo ship that had entered Australian waters carrying a devastating threat to national security in the form of 438 emaciated refugees. As he rallied the

people to the defence of Australian sovereignty, Howard never directly incited racial hatred. But the race card [11], once played, is on the table for all to see [12].

The mood in Australia is grim. “John Howard is not only a total embarrassment, but an utter scourge,” reports Dr Jocelyne Scutt, a human rights lawyer from Melbourne. (In this issue [13] (pdf) of *New Matilda*, she draws a parallel with Hitler’s Germany, suggesting that all Australians – not just the PM – share responsibility for the cankers that have emerged in their society.)

Dr Scutt tells your correspondent, “John Howard will go down in history as the worst Prime Minister Australia has ever had. No wonder he wins this month’s award for damage to democracy. Pity is, he’ll qualify again and again, until at last he is sent out of office by Australian voters.

Workers’ rights are no more: minimum wages will be set with an eye to reducing workers’ incomes to the poverty line or below. “Flexibility” in the workplace means that employers can call workers in for several hours at a time, without notice, then expect them to while away the time in between, before they are called back for more “rush hour” work. Meanwhile, real wages are reduced through casualisation of the paid workforce.

Australia went to war in Iraq – despite huge protest and pleas to conform to UN directions and international law. The majority of Australians know that we are there because Howard has a strange obsession for Bush and his administration.

Don’t miss the background to our prestigious Bad Democracy awards:

Tom Burgis introduces [13] the awards and outlines the first nominees

Plus, find out why Silvio Berlusconi [14] was a worthy winner of the first Bad Democracy award

Howard has fostered division in society. Racism has flared repeatedly during his premiership. Religious freedom is disappearing, with his promotion of Australia as a Christian country, ignoring the Indigenous Australians, the adherents of many other beliefs, agnostics and atheists, and the concerns of those constructing the Australian Constitution that no religion should be pre-eminent, and that none should be allied to the state.

So-called security legislation has been passed, which interferes with citizens and residents’ rights to legal advice and representation, and could see 16-year-olds locked up, like the adults, without knowing the offences they are alleged to have committed. Reporting of arrests and of those “disappeared” is outlawed, and protesting about government excesses, or even about the policies with which citizens might disagree, is unlawful as “sedition”.

Fortunately, unlike kings, prime ministers do not go on forever. Destroyers of democracy, like tyrants, eventually go. The day will come when Australia can again hold up its head as a supporter of democratic principles and practices, and a proponent of lifegiving freedoms, rather than “despotism and despair.”

If Tony Blair is George W Bush’s poodle, Australians fume, Howard is the American president’s possum – which brings us to January’s nominations, headed by Dubya himself.

Bush’s influence pervades the list. He has “staked his legacy” on free trade being the antidote to poverty and terrorism. Such is the White House’s faith in the potential of lowered trade barriers to cure the world’s ills that it dispatched its trade representative to the WTO with instructions to

threaten poor countries with inclusion on the axis of evil if they declined to allow US firms to snaffle their national assets.

Washington has also given tacit endorsements to the repressive regimes of south-east Asia – two of which make the list – on the reasoning that unruly Asians require the firmest of hands if they are to fuel economic growth. “You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs,” we are told. Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Senior General Than Shwe of Burma would seem to agree.

Then we have Hosni Mubarak, a man with a human rights record so lengthy it sounds as though the needle is stuck, and who nonetheless enjoys the second largest slice of US foreign and military aid after Israel. Naturally, the country serves as a handy rendition spot. The *Mukhabarat* are feared throughout Egypt as the modern incarnation of the pharaoh’s bodyguard. They are outdone, though, by the Chinese police. If Hong Kong’s coppers showed at December’s WTO summit [15] that they are capable of restraint, China’s security forces, unfettered and unaccountable, seem to have gone berserk. The slaughter [16] of innocents in Guangdong this month is a bloody reminder that, as the sleeping giant’s economy awakes, what first democratic urges had been stirring are being unflinchingly stifled.

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[4] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy/december_3079.jsp

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[14] http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy/december_3079.jsp

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