

The Sydney Morning Herald

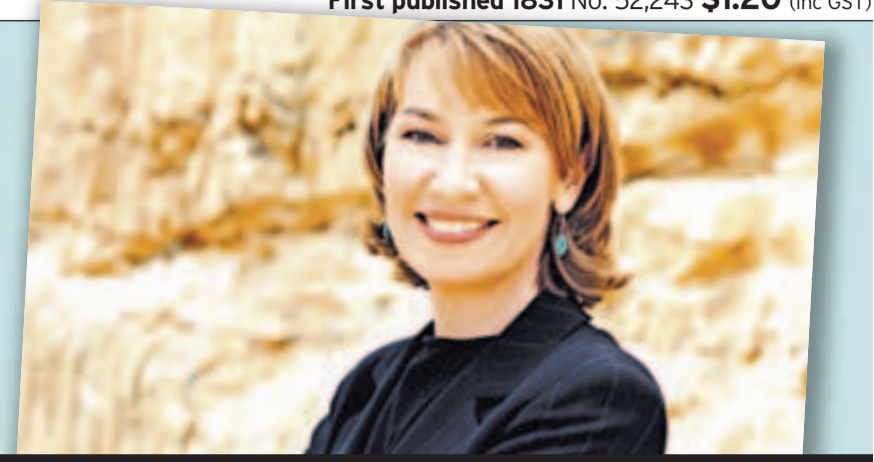
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Maxine McKew, Adam Spencer, Geraldine Brooks and other bright minds on our city's inner soul

the (sydney) magazine

Plus Paul Ham on the locals who want you off their beach • Akira Isogawa's shopping secrets • Craig Wing tackles the pinstripe • Portrait of the artist and his family: the Olsens in profile • Abbie Cornish jumps into '40s-inspired fashion



- Surprise doubling of forces in Iraq
- Japan pleads for Australia's protection

Nation split as PM sends in more troops

Louise Dodson and Tom Allard

The Prime Minister, John Howard, has plunged Australia into a new divisive national debate over Iraq after federal cabinet decided to more than double the nation's existing deployment of ground troops to the turbulent country.

Labor opposed the increased commitment yesterday, charging the Coalition with dramatically reversing its position of the past two years that Australia would not send significantly more troops.

Mr Howard conceded the US and the British military had been pressing Australia for some time to lift its troop commitments in Iraq, because "they have been carrying a very significant load".

Cabinet had a long discussion about the controversial deployment, but sources said there was no dissent.

The new taskforce of 450 troops will be sent initially for a year, after which the deployment will be reviewed. Mr Howard did not rule out sending further troops if they are needed.

The troops will be under Australian command working with the British. They will be sent to the southern province of Muthanna and will protect a contingent of non-combat Japanese troops engaged in engineering projects including road and school reconstruction. The Australians will also be involved in further training of Iraqi security forces.

Mr Howard received calls from Japan's Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, five days ago and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on Monday asking for the troops.

The taskforce will leave in 10 weeks. But defence analysts said the military will have difficulty completing an expensive and hasty refit of its fleet of light armoured vehicles needed to properly protect the troops from car bomb, mortar and rocket attacks.

Mr Howard admitted the decision to increase Australia's commitment was not an easy one and there could be further casualties.

Once more into shadows in Howard's hands-off war

COMMENT
Paul McGeough

The explanation for this new Australian deployment to Iraq doesn't stack up.

The Prime Minister's rhetoric about Iraq being at a new "tilting" point is at odds with the official spin out of Washington and London; but if it is as dire as that, why has he found a relative holiday camp at which to station these 450 would-be defenders of a threatened democracy?

And why, after leaving Australian voters in last October's election with the idea that there would be no further deploy-

ments in Iraq, has he, seemingly out of the blue, put up Australia's hand to do a brief for which Britain had already dispatched the men of the Queen's Dragoon Guards and the Princess of Wales' Royal Regiment?

The numbers are messy too. The first number that leapt out at us from this part of Iraq was \$95 million - the US-dollar amount the Japanese paid to the local tribes early last year to protect them from the locals.

Subsequently, 1400 Dutch troops were dispatched to watch over the 600-strong Japanese reconstruction team, members of

More reports - Page 4 Hugh White comment - Page 13

The taskforce is needed to protect the Japanese when the 1400 Dutch troops guarding them withdraw next month. Two soldiers from the Dutch contingent have been lost to hostile action in the past 18 months.

The Labor leader, Kim Beazley, said the Opposition supported the troops, but opposed Mr Howard's decision to send them. Asked if Mr Howard should have declined the request, he said: "I don't think we should be doing this, no, I do not."

Although the decision was wrong, he said, "We support them [Australia's troops] totally in all their needs and all their requirements."

Mr Howard said the fear was that the Japanese troops would leave Iraq if Australians were not sent to protect them and that the international coalition could crumble at a time when Iraq was "very much at a tilting point".

Japan's continued presence in Iraq was vital. "Working alongside and in partnership with a close regional ally and partner such as Japan is very important from Australia's point of view."

If the coalition effort crumbled, "it would be a devastating blow to the fight against terrorism and I think it would imbue with a new zeal those in our own region who think that terrorism is the answer", Mr Howard said.

Japan's chief cabinet secretary, Hiroyuki Hosoda, praised Australia. "We welcome this decision as a government and think highly of it," he said.

At this stage there are about 900 Australian army, navy and air force personnel in and around Iraq, but only about 160 combat troops on the ground. The increased commitment will mean additional annual spending of between \$250 million and \$300 million from the budget, Mr Howard said.

The extra troops will be drawn mainly from the 1st Brigade, based in Darwin. They will stay for a year, on two six-month rotations. Forty light armoured vehicles will be sent to Iraq in support of the new deployment, with crews and support personnel drawn from the army's 2nd Cavalry Regiment.



"I've had a dream of being a professional footballer and it's been taken away from me, largely through my own fault." Dane Tilse flanked by his parents Chris and Michael yesterday. Photo: Peter Stoop

One drunken night, and one sorry Knight

Brett Keeble and Justin Norrie

Choking back tears, Dane Tilse admits he was drunk. If he'd been sober, the young rugby league star says, he wouldn't be in this trouble.

The 20-year-old player - sacked by the Newcastle Knights - is contemplating the ruins of his career before it gets started.

He has paid the heaviest price among 12 Knights players caught after a drunken rampage at a residence at Charles Sturt

University in Bathurst early on Sunday morning. Flanked by his parents, Michael and Chris, in Newcastle yesterday, Tilse apologised for his part in the escapade.

"I've had a dream for a long time of being a professional footballer and it's been taken away from me, largely through my own fault," he said.

Police, meanwhile, have launched an investigation after a 19-year-old female student broke her silence, telling them that a

Knights player indecently assaulted her. Police said the "notoriety" of those involved led them to establish Strike Force Claine to investigate the rampage.

But they said the young woman, a resident of Mitchell, Trussett and Gordon House, an off-campus residence for Charles Sturt students, was still unsure whether to pursue the matter further.

After counselling from the university on Monday, she went to police yesterday morning to lodge

a complaint against the player, who has not been identified.

Six detectives from the strike force want to interview other witnesses before deciding whether to press charges. It has been alleged a player straddled the sleeping student during the ruckus and put his hand down her pants.

Tilse, the only one of the 12 Knights to speak out yesterday, refused to discuss the specific events of Sunday morning. It is understood he was among

Knights players who attended a National Rugby League rookie seminar on the treatment of women three weeks ago - seminars developed after last year's Bulldogs sex scandal.

But the former NSW under-19s and Junior Kangaroos front-rower believes his penalty was harsh.

While the other players were fined, Tilse stands to lose up to

Continued Page 7
Senior Knights fined - Page 44

Rail signals overhaul runs into a red light

Alexandra Smith
Transport Reporter

The State Government has balked at implementing a key safety recommendation on railway signalling from the Waterfall train crash inquiry because it is untested and potentially too costly.

After a two-year inquiry that was heavily critical of the Government's approach to rail safety reforms, the Premier, Bob Carr, also refused to commit to a deadline for all other critical changes identified by the commission that investigated the crash.

Delivering its response to the state's second fatal rail accident since 1999, the Government will scrap its controversial policy of trapping passengers in carriages in the event of an accident, admitting it may be an unsafe practice.

Mr Carr said the Government would adopt 114 of the 127 recommendations contained in commissioner Peter McInerney's report into the crash, which killed seven people on January 31, 2003. The Government supports Mr McInerney's recommendation to



Too dear ... a replacement for signals would cost \$1.5 billion

replace 2500 signals and 45 signal boxes with on-board speed limiters, known as an automatic train protection system.

But the system may take years to materialise on CityRail's fleet of 1500 carriages because of its cost, complexity and impact on the national rail network.

The chief executive of RailCorp, Vince Graham, said installing the system - which has been trialled and abandoned in Switzerland, Britain, Canada and Hong Kong - would cost at least \$1.5 billion.

"It would also be necessary to ensure all Australian trains accessing the NSW network were

Beach-shack battlers revolt on land tax, so Carr jumps

Anne Davies
State Political Editor

Bob Carr has admitted to his backbench that the broadening of land tax to catch an extra 60,000 landowners is hurting Labor politically and will be reconsidered as part of the budget deliberations.

At the first caucus meeting of the parliamentary session yesterday, the Premier faced a deeply concerned party room, with several backbenchers telling him bluntly the expanded land tax was costing Labor votes.

Although the changes to land tax were announced last April, the reality is now hitting home. Assessments for first-time taxpayers began arriving in late January, with most bills ranging from several hundred dollars to \$1300.

The tax is on any property a person holds other than their principal residence, and it applies regardless of whether there is rental income. It is payable on the family beach shack or blocks of land, and it has to be paid within 90 days. Mr Carr told

backbenchers: "Everything that you are saying about the politics of this is right," before assuring them that the tax would be reviewed in the context of the budget.

"His tone was very conciliatory," said one caucus member, "but the Premier also stressed that there were serious budget constraints on the Government with competing demands for spending on schools, hospitals and other programs."

The Treasurer, Andrew Refshauge, also spoke about the difficult environment faced by the Government in preparing this year's budget. The budget slipped into the red last year and this year a deficit of \$118 million was forecast. A change to the accounting standard will mask the real state of the budget, with a surplus of \$1 billion likely to be reported.

The changes to land tax were announced last April and billed as a fairer system that would help small business. Instead of targeting investment properties on land worth more than \$317,000 and million-dollar homes, the

then treasurer, Michael Egan, announced it would apply to any property other than the home. The rates of tax were lowered at the top end, but the removal of the threshold has netted an additional 60,000 taxpayers, on top of the 139,000 people who were liable under the old system.

Some speakers at yesterday's caucus meeting criticised the fact that the changes had delivered tax breaks to the rich while slugging the less well off, who used investment properties as part of their retirement strategy.

The 2.25 per cent vendor tax so hated by the property industry was not mentioned. It affects far fewer people because it is payable only when a property is sold. It is not having the same political impact.

Asked later whether the land tax was hurting the Government, Mr Carr replied: "I am not going to brief you about what's in the budget; you will just have to wait till May. We will assess all of our revenue and spending options as we put that document together."

WEATHER Details - Page 18

- Sydney city Mainly fine, S-SE winds 21°-27°
Tomorrow chance late storm 19°-29°
- Liverpool Mainly fine, S-SE winds 19°-29°
Tomorrow chance late storm 19°-31°
- Penrith Mainly fine, S-SE winds 19°-31°
Tomorrow chance late storm 19°-33°
- Newcastle Chance shower, SE winds 20°-27°
Tomorrow chance late storm 20°-29°
- Wollongong Partly cloudy, S-SE winds 18°-25°
Tomorrow chance late storm 18°-27°

COLUMN 8 More - Page 20

Her Majesty most definitely would not have been amused, but Herald reader Patrick Woods was. "On Victoria Road, near Marsden Road in Ermington there is a new townhouse development," he writes. "It's being marketed under the name *The Albert on Victoria*."



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