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## Editorial

### Australia: the politics of fear and neglect

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Australian clinical and public-health research is an emblem of excellence across the Asia-Pacific region. That enviable position is being put at risk by Prime Minister John Howard's indifference to the academic medical community and his profound intolerance to those less secure than himself and his administration. The latest example of his complacency was a comment he made on a Melbourne radio station last week. He said that people living with HIV should not be allowed to enter and live in Australia—"prima facie, no", he asserted. Australia already has tough immigration rules for those with HIV. All hopeful migrants aged over 15 years are tested for the virus. Their applications stumble if they are found to be positive.

To any visitor, Australian culture feels progressive and inclusive. This attractive exterior belies a strong undercurrent of political conservatism, which Howard is ruthlessly tapping into. As the Australian columnist Janet Albrechtson wrote recently, "the Australian polity is inherently conservative...a conservative coalition has ruled for 42 of 58 years". 2007 is an election year for Australia. How the country interprets its past and sees its hopes for the future will be critical not only for the health of its people but also for the contribution Australia makes to world health. At present, Australian politicians are scoring well below their potential.

Take Aboriginal health. The current health minister, Tony Abbott, recently insulted Aboriginal peoples by claiming that those who spoke up for indigenous health were simply "establishing politically and morally correct credentials". On climate change, environment minister Malcolm Turnbull apparently sees little new in the latest alarming assessments by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Reviewing the effect of successive Howard administrations on Australia's academic community since 1996, the respected scientist Ian Lowe has written that "the present government has gone to extraordinary lengths to silence independent opinion within the research community". This year provides an opportunity at the ballot box to bring a new enlightenment to Australian health and medical science.

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