

2. War

The biggest decision of John Howard's term as prime minister has been to take Australia to war against Iraq. Why did he do it? When he attacked Iraq in March 2003, he said in his Address to the Nation:

The Government has decided to commit Australian forces to action to disarm Iraq because we believe it is right, it is lawful and it's in Australia's national interest.

We are determined to join other countries to deprive Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction, its chemical and biological weapons, which even in minute quantities are capable of causing death and destruction on a mammoth scale ...

And the more countries that have these weapons—countries run by despotic regimes—the greater becomes the likelihood that these weapons will fall into the hands of terrorists. If that happens can anyone doubt that the terrorists will use them, whatever the cost might be?

Iraq has long supported international terrorism. Saddam Hussein pays \$25,000 to each family of Palestinian suicide bombers who wreak such murderous havoc in Israel. He has sheltered and sponsored many terrorist groups.

International terrorism knows no borders. We have learnt that to our cost. Australia and Australians anywhere in the world are as much targets as any other western country and its people ...

There's also another reason and that is our close security alliance with the United States. The Americans have helped us in the past and the United States is very important to Australia's long-term security ... We believe that so far from our action in Iraq increasing the terrorist threat it will, by stopping the spread

of chemical and biological weapons, make it less likely that a devastating terrorist attack will be carried out against Australia.

I want to assure all of you that the action we are taking is fully legal under international law. Back in the early 1990s resolutions were passed by the Security Council authorising military action against Iraq.

That action was only suspended on condition that Iraq gave up its weapons of mass destruction. Clearly we all know this has not happened. As a result the authority to take military action under those earlier resolutions has revived ...

This has been a very difficult decision for the Government but a decision which is good for Australia's long term security and the cause of a safer world. (Address to the Nation on Committing Australian Forces to War in Iraq, 20 March 2003.)¹

The Australian people had no appetite for war in Iraq. Seventy per cent opposed a non-UN sanctioned attack. Seven hundred thousand people marched on the streets a month before Howard's speech, to persuade the government to change its mind. A non-UN sanctioned attack on innocent people offended the fundamental values of Australians from all parts of our society. Howard responded:

Well, I don't think the mob, to use that vernacular, has quite made up its mind on this issue, and it can't really make up its mind until we know what all the alternatives are.²

The mob? Is this the same Howard that we admire so much for his ability to understand and speak for ordinary Australians?

Four years have now passed since our soldiers went to Iraq. What does the whole experience tell us about the principles and values that drive Howard and the Australian conservatives?

Was the war morally justified?

There are times when going to war can be morally justified. Religious and secular leaders are in broad agreement about the conditions that make war acceptable (the 'just war' theory). These

reasons are based on the principles of self-defence, or the defence of a friend against armed attack.

Neither Australia nor its ally America was under actual or threatened attack from Iraq, so the war cannot be justified on these grounds.

Was the war legal?

As a signatory to the United Nations Charter, Australia is obliged to follow the UN rules. Article 2/4 states:

All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.³

Article 51 permits exceptions:

There are only two circumstances in which the use of force is permissible: in collective or individual self-defence against an actual or imminent armed attack; and when the Security Council has directed or authorized use of force to maintain or restore international peace and security.⁴

Howard claimed however that this war was fully legal because of UN resolutions passed 'back in the 1990s'. This is manifestly incorrect. In 2002–03, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom pressed very hard for a specific resolution in order to make such an attack legal. The UN refused to give it.

This means that Howard committed Australia to an unprovoked attack on Iraq. Self-defence was not an issue. Iraq was no threat to Australia. Our attack was not sanctioned by the UN and therefore was illegal. This is the action of a rogue state, not a good international citizen.

Why did Howard wage war on Iraq?

Howard claimed that he took Australia to war because he believed there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Let us evaluate that claim.

What was the Australian security service telling him? Analysts in the public service are paid to provide frank and fearless advice to the government of the day. Regardless of their own or the government's position on an issue, their job is to provide the facts.

Howard had promised to stand with George Bush in the war on terror, which quickly came to mean war on Iraq. It appears this promise was sealed long before he declared his intention to the Australian parliament.

Did Howard really want frank and fearless advice or was he just looking for a justification to go to war?

It appears that he made certain the advice he received from Australian security analysts did not contradict what he was hearing from George Bush. He did this by politicising the public service. He placed a barrier between himself and the public service, a barrier made up of his own private staff to serve up the information he wanted. We have also learned that ministers' personal staffs (they now number 520) use intimidation against public servants who insist on giving the facts and refuse to tell ministers only what they want to hear.⁵

Australia's intelligence services, in particular, the Office of National Assessments (ONA), were doubtful of the existence of WMDs, as was Hans Blix, the UN weapons inspector. Those doubts have since been confirmed. Yet, as with the 'children overboard' affair, Howard was able to massage, muffle or bury this independent advice, with the help of political staffers so he could do exactly what he wanted. Even Andrew Wilkie⁶, the lone whistle-blower from the ONA, who revealed Howard's WMD claims lacked evidence, was not able to put a brake on Howard's march to war.

In choosing to deceive the Australian people (and possibly himself) in order to keep a promise to the head of a foreign nation, Howard's fundamental loyalties are exposed for all to see.

Information management

By controlling the flow of information around him, Howard could go on believing in WMDs. This is easily achieved: officials exercise self-censorship once they have been punished a few times for offering frank and fearless advice. Howard doesn't hear what he doesn't want to hear, thus maintaining the precious option of 'deniability' if things go wrong. This is the first, or background, level of information management that Howard employs.

The second level is more active propaganda, an essential tool for a leader who wants to attack another country. Howard intensified his campaign as the time approached for him to keep his promise to George Bush.

Inciting a nation to war is not difficult, as Hermann Göring, Hitler's second in command, explained to his captors and documented in the Nuremberg Diary:

Why, of course, the people don't want war ... The people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. All you have to do is tell them they're being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism. It works the same way in any country.⁷

It certainly worked in the same way in Australia. Howard followed this script, convincing Australians they were under attack and then attacked Labor for its lack of patriotism. Labor had taken a different position—adherence to our international obligations as signatories of the United Nations Charter.

Following Bush's lead he worked to forge a connection between Saddam and terrorism. In his 'Address to the Nation' (above) he claims that Saddam 'has sheltered and sponsored many terrorist groups'. This, we know, was a concoction, but it allowed Howard to position himself as protector of the Australian people and to invoke the memory of Bali.

Howard was not above crude fear mongering in describing Saddam's supposed chemical and biological weapons as 'even in minute quantities...capable of causing death and destruction on a mammoth scale'. This claim has also been exposed as false, along with

the similar ploys used by Bush and Blair. Invisible poison at the disposal of ‘terrorism [that] knows no borders’ paints a nightmare scenario, which makes it hard for people to think clearly. The arch-propagandist Joseph Goebbels put it chillingly: ‘If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it.’⁸

Elements of the commercial media in Australia, forgetting their journalistic ethics, failed to attack the purported link between Saddam and terrorist groups and joined in the vilification of the foreigners, refugees, the UN, of France and Germany, and anyone who questioned the Bush–Cheney–Rumsfeld line.

In fact, the cheer squad for the war was not that big. Apart from a small clique at Murdoch’s Australian newspapers and a few shock jocks generating disproportionate levels of noise, there were few enthusiasts. Many of those who supported the war only did so on the basis of misinformation about WMDs, or, once the war was declared, out of loyalty to our troops. Yet, for eighteen months leading up to the declaration of the war, Howard was able to keep the issue of WMDs at the forefront of print and electronic media.

The other side of the argument was rarely heard. To argue that neither Australia nor its ally, the US, were under threat of ‘actual or imminent armed attack’ (the UN’s stricture) was of no interest to the government or the media. To argue this way was to be ‘naïve’ (a term Howard loves to use against his opponents), to dishonour the memory of the 9/11 victims and the Bali victims. To claim that the war was immoral and illegal was to be somehow reckless and extremist. Howard and his cronies had won the propaganda battle for the hearts and minds of Australians.

Now we know beyond question that the war was based on misinformation, that Saddam was not hiding WMDs. Yet, because of Bush, Blair and Howard’s miscalculation, an estimated 100,000 people died in Iraq as a result of the war itself—leaving aside the occupation—mainly from air attacks conducted by the Coalition of the

Willing.⁹ It is now clear that the self-appointed rescuers of Iraq are themselves guilty of ‘causing death and destruction on a mammoth scale.’ Howard now stands condemned out of his own mouth.

When war turns to occupation

Once the war was under way, Howard even brought George Bush to Australia, to help enthuse the populace about the war. As described by Margo Kingston in *Not Happy John!*, the visit, which was not a formal State visit, was most irregular.¹⁰ For example, only those who supported the war were invited to socialise with the President, thus excluding half the parliamentarians and more than half the media. Such partisan behaviour with a visiting head of state was unprecedented in Australian history.

Australia has always insisted that foreign leaders respect our democratic traditions and do not intervene in our democratic processes. However, Howard had no hesitation in inviting George Bush to come over to support the government's war propaganda campaign.

When the so-called conservative, Howard, invites the intervention of a foreign power in domestic politics it points to where Howard's real loyalties lie.

Meanwhile, the invading troops became bogged down in Iraq, as could have been predicted. Having waged an immoral war, Australia and its Coalition partners then compounded their folly by failing in their duties as an occupying force. The Geneva Convention requires an occupying power to protect the civilian population against all forms of violence. Insurgents may be responsible for many of the massacres today; however, the Convention requires invading powers to have planned for and prevented such atrocities. There is no evidence of Bush or Howard having planned for the long period of occupation that was to follow the war.

Occupied Iraq has now descended into civil war. The total number of deaths since the start of the war has risen to over half a million. The number of those permanently maimed is many times higher. Right now,

hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi people are suffering pain and disability as a result of the action started by the Coalition. The number of refugees has now reached four million.

The nightly news reports of deaths and maiming are unbearable to many. The fact that we are in part responsible for this level of killing disgusts many Australians. It deeply offends our Australian values. At this time we share responsibility for over one hundred Iraqi deaths per day, until either George Bush or John Howard is voted out of office.

The anti-war voice

Amid the gloom, however, dissenting voices have been raised, as Australians stand up for our traditional values. Former prime ministers, retired diplomats and military leaders, church men and women, academics and journalists have told the truth and demanded better leadership for our nation.

As Howard was preparing to commit troops to Iraq, some of our most distinguished public figures were prompted to write an open letter deploring the move. Former prime ministers, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and Gough Whitlam; former Australian Defence Force chiefs, General Peter Gration, and Admiral Alan Beaumont and Admiral Michael Hudson, made the following statement:

We put this conviction directly and unequivocally.

It would constitute a failure of the duty of government to protect the integrity and ensure the security of this nation, to commit any Australian forces in support of the US military offensive against Iraq without the backing of a specific UN resolution.¹¹

Further, on 23 October 2003—the day Howard handed the Australian Parliament over to the United States President, his secret service and the United States media—the nation held its breath as Simon Crean, leader of the Opposition, stood to speak. In the absence of prime ministerial leadership, it fell to him to speak for Australian values. He carried the responsibility of speaking for that majority of Australians who refused the regime's inducements to war. For a few moments we

had a glimpse of how politics in Australia might look in the absence of Howard. These are the words of Simon Crean, who had the toughest assignment of the day:

Mr President.

I join most warmly in the Prime Minister's welcome.

We are especially pleased that you have been able to make this visit following your attendance at APEC. We recall with pride that APEC was an initiative of a great Australian Labor leader Bob Hawke. And it was Prime Minister Hawke who insisted that the participation of the United States was vital to APEC's future.

Your presence here today reminds us all that the partnership between Australia and the United States is broad, deep, many-sided, long-standing – and, in its fundamentals, bipartisan. It is, above all, a partnership of peoples – something beyond political parties and administrations.

More than sixty years ago, a great Labor Prime Minister, John Curtin, and a great American President, Franklin Roosevelt, forged that partnership together, in the crucible of the Second World War. Curtin famously wrote in December 1941: *Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom.*

It is altogether fitting today that we should reaffirm that alliance in a world of rapid change. The Australia of 1941 has been transformed – as Australia's standing in the world has been transformed.

We now also look to the future in our own region – as both a good friend and a good neighbour among the nations of Asia and the Pacific. And we look to our future in terms of our deep and enduring support for the United Nations – and the principles of the UN Charter – as we did in East Timor.

Above all, Australia looks to itself – to the self-reliance of a proud, free, strong and independent people.

The Australian perspective is bound to differ, from time to time, with the perspective of the United States. Of course, on occasions, friends disagree, as we on this side did with you on

the war in Iraq. But, such is the strength of our shared values, interests and principles, those differences can enrich rather than diminish, strengthen rather than weaken, our partnership.

Our commitment to the Alliance remains unshakeable, as does our commitment to the War on Terror, but friends must be honest with each other. Honesty is, after all, the foundation stone of that great Australian value – ‘mateship’.

Mr President, the world has changed, but there remains an essential truth in Prime Minister Curtin’s words 62 years ago – Australia still looks to America. A truth not just for Australia, but for democracies everywhere.

It is a profound historic truth, which derives its power – not from the might of America – but from the democratic promise upon which America was brought forth, conceived and dedicated 227 years ago:

The equal rights of all nations.

Respect for the opinions of all peoples.

And the idea that all men are created equal.

These principles, taken together, form the true and imperishable basis of the promise of, and the friendship between, our two great nations. May they never perish from the face of the Earth.¹²

This is no anti-American ‘leftie’. These are the words of a true statesman who seems to demonstrate a better understanding of the American and Australian heritage and what it has to offer than the current President or our Prime Minister.

Crean leaves us with the question: where does the Iraq war sit within a heritage that proclaims the equal rights of all nations, respect for the opinions of all peoples and the idea that all men are created equal?

Conclusion

Was Howard pursuing the Australian national interest by leading us to war in Iraq? Clearly he was not.

Far from enhancing Australia's standing, this war has hurt Australia's national interest by taking us into an illegal and immoral war of aggression. It has drawn us into the sphere of the Bush administration's warmongering policies. No longer can we claim to be an innocent nation, an honest broker, a champion of peacemaking.

By his decisions, Howard has undermined fundamental Australian values, which deplore unsanctioned wars of aggression. Furthermore, it is now widely recognised that his war has increased the risk to Australians of terrorist attack.

Why did Howard and his conservative supporters make such an appalling blunder?

With the perspective of time it now seems clear that it was in order to please the Bush administration. As simple as that.

When a prime minister can take a nation into an immoral and illegal war, against the will of its people, solely in order to please a foreign leader and when he lies to justify that war, it is clear that checks and balances of our democracy are not working.