

Australian government rejects call for caution on US war

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28 September 2002

The Howard government this week dismissed warnings by nine former political and military leaders that participation in a US-led invasion of Iraq without UN approval would be potentially disastrous for Australia. The swift rejection is another indication that Australian troops could soon be dispatched to a so-called “pre-emptive” war.

Former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and ex-Liberal Party leader John Hewson, together with former Labor prime ministers Bob Hawke and Gough Whitlam and ex-Labor leader and governor-general Bill Hayden, wrote to national newspapers on Thursday warning of the dangers of action outside the UN umbrella. Joining them were former defence chiefs Admiral Alan Beaumont and Admiral Michael Hudson and current Returned Services League president Major-General Peter Phillips.

The grouping—arranged by Hawke, who dispatched Australian forces to the Gulf War in 1990-91—is not in any way opposed to a fresh military intervention, but is anxious that a UN rubberstamp be obtained first.

“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 our nation to commit any Australian forces in support of a United States military offensive against Iraq without the backing of a specific United Nations Security Council resolution,” they wrote.

Prime Minister John Howard, however, flatly rejected the call. Speaking from London, where he held talks with his British counterpart Tony Blair, Howard said Australia was strongly supporting attempts to secure a new UN resolution. “It is clearly not in Australia’s interests for me to speculate as to what this country might do if those attempts fail.” Defence Minister Robert Hill was more explicit, saying: “The UN charter does allow for self-defence, and self-defence has got to be interpreted in terms of the threat of weapons of mass destruction and

terrorism—and a state is entitled to defend itself.”

Several government MPs openly denounced Fraser. One Victorian Liberal MP Sophie Panopoulos accused Fraser of supporting murderous regimes, playing a “spoiling role” and suffering from “spotlight deprivation syndrome”. Parliamentary secretary Ross Cameron condemned the ex-Liberal prime minister for “white-anting him [Howard] on Iraq”.

Labor Party leader Simon Crean, who has carefully kept open the option of supporting a unilateral US strike, remained conspicuously silent on the letter. Not one of Labor’s current parliamentarians indicated they agreed with it, and former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating refused to sign.

The letter reveals deeply-felt fears in ruling circles on a number of fronts. First, opinion polls have shown growing public opposition to the imminent war, with a clear majority of people remaining unconvinced that any evidence exists to justify it. There are concerns at the potential for the war to trigger sharp social conflict.

Second, there is apprehension about the possible collapse of the UN framework and the implications of unbridled US militarism. Interviewed on the ABC TV’s *7.30 Report*, Hawke referred to the death of the League of Nations prior to World War II and declared: “It would be dangerous in the extreme if the world were to now say, ‘We’re going to abandon the United Nations’. You just can’t contemplate that.” More specifically, the ruling establishment has long utilised the UN to pursue the strategic and economic interests of Australia—a relatively weak capitalist power—notably in the Australian-led interventions in Cambodia and East Timor during the 1990s.

Third, the Howard government’s unreserved alignment with the Bush White House threatens to undermine Australia’s standing in the highly unstable Asia-Pacific region, where Canberra is already regarded as a US

lackey. Fraser and Hawke have previously criticised the Howard government for turning away from the region, where Australia has key export, investment and diplomatic interests.

Hawke told the *7.30 Report* that Australian involvement in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people would poison the country's reputation and expose it to a greater risk of terrorism. If Australia were responsible, together with Britain and the US, for 300,000 Iraqi civilian casualties, "the sort of figure which is talked about by military thinkers in the US", he warned, "imagine the animus against Australia".

Finally, there is nervousness in military circles that such a war could backfire disastrously, particularly given the lack of public support. Returned Services League president Phillips said Vietnam veterans had voiced fears of soldiers being drawn into an unpopular US-led war, reviving bitter memories of the defeat in Vietnam. "Clearly we would have preferred a public debate with additional information that would justify us going in with the Americans," Phillips stated.

Michael O'Connor, executive director of the Australian Defence Association, a pro-military lobby group, warned that Australia could only send a "token" ground force. It would be "under-manned and under-gunned for high-intensity, open-country armoured warfare". Brigadier Jim Wallace, a former head of Australia's Special Forces and the Special Air Service Regiment, said the army was grossly under-prepared for deployment overseas.

In an effort to win domestic and international support for the war, these layers are urging the UN to present the Iraqi regime with a new series of ultimatums. Hawke told the *7.30 Report* that he hoped the UN would impose a "tough timetable requiring unfettered inspection". If Saddam Hussein ignored the resolution or if weapons were discovered, then the situation would be "very different".

With the White House clearly intent on establishing unchallenged US global hegemony, militarily and economically, the Australian government is determined to back Bush unconditionally. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer revealed this week that Australian military officials had met with their Pentagon counterparts to discuss detailed military options. "As a close ally of the United States, Australia inevitably has consulted with the Americans on military issues," he told parliament.

Unlike anyone but the most ardent advocates for war against Iraq, Downer claimed that this week's "Iraq dossier" produced by Blair proved "beyond reasonable

doubt" that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and intended to use them. Howard followed on by declaring his agreement with Blair's "very strong principled position". Not to be outdone, Crean also welcomed the document, claiming it strengthened the case for UN action, and urging Howard to make a similar case before the Australian parliament.

For all the talk of "principle" and "proof", Howard and his cabinet have simply concluded that if they do not participate in the US war, Australia will be frozen out of lucrative Iraqi markets by a new regime acting at Washington's behest, and suffer the Bush administration's wrath to boot.

A September 23 article in the *Australian Financial Review* provided a rare but revealing insight into the real considerations behind the government's position. According to journalist Geoffrey Barker, unnamed senior Australian ministers were last week "saying privately that Australia had no choice but to join the US in unilateral action if the UN failed to give it the authority for an attack".

"Not to do so, said one senior minister, would have devastating consequences for the US-Australia alliance. The US would regard as hostile any Australian move to withdraw the two RAN frigates now helping to enforce UN sanctions against Iraq." Referring to highly profitable Australian exports to Iraq, including grain sales worth more than \$800 million last year, the minister said there would be few trade opportunities for Australia in Iraq following Saddam Hussein's removal if Australia were not part of the US coalition.

The same considerations underpin Defence Minister Hill's announcement this week that his department is redrafting a proposed military strategy White Paper to declare the US alliance to be Australia's most important relationship, supplanting previous emphases on Asian and regional relations. After three rewritings in several months, the revised document will state that the military must shift its central focus, from the defence of continental Australia to the deployment of forces on a global scale in US-led operations.



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