

Australian government commits to Bush's war

Mike Head**20 September 2002**

The Australian government this week felt compelled by growing public opposition to the planned US-led war on Iraq to allow a token parliamentary debate on the issue. But even as the parliamentary session proceeded, Prime Minister John Howard made it crystal clear that he is committed to joining the Bush administration's assault, with or without UN sanction, regardless of any parliamentary discussion.

After initially being caught off-guard by Iraq's unconditional offer to allow the return of UN weapons inspectors, Howard quickly fell into line behind Bush in rejecting the Iraqi announcement out of hand. Howard dismissed it as "nothing more than a diplomatic ploy" and backed Bush in insisting that the UN immediately pass a resolution authorising an attack if Iraq failed to meet provocative new demands.

Moreover, Defence Minister Robert Hill predicted that Australian SAS troops, reconnaissance planes and naval warships, already operating in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, would make a "niche" contribution to the US military action. He confirmed that military preparations were well underway, describing them as "prudent contingency planning".

According to one poll taken last weekend, only 19 percent of Australians support military action without UN approval, while 74 percent are opposed. Almost 90 percent believe that UN weapons inspectors should be sent into Iraq before any military operation is launched. Another poll, conducted for the government-owned Special Broadcasting Service, reported a distinct movement against the war over the past month. Opposition to Australia joining any US attack, under any circumstances, rose from 50 to 53 percent. The sharpest change occurred among young people, aged 18 to 34, who are now 56 percent against military action, up by 10 percentage points.

In an effort to provide a show of democracy, some 80 MPs lined up to speak for 10 minutes each, extending the parliamentary debate into a second day. Many, particularly on the Labor side, warned that the issue had the potential to cause civil unrest on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War.

Labor MP and former minister Carmen Lawrence accused the US of "rank hypocrisy" and of seeking "revenge killings". She warned of "blood washing blood" in a "never ending bloody revenge already drenching the soil of the Middle East". Sydney Labor MP Tanya Plibersek asked why the Bush administration

was not targeting another country that "uses military hardware to bulldoze homes and kill civilians; it's called Israel and the war criminal is Ariel Sharon".

Another Labor MP, Jill Hall, told parliament that Bush and his administration were not interested in peace, just "revenge and a distraction from domestic matters". Tasmanian Labor MP Harry Quick warned that the Iraq war could be "as divisive for Australian society as our involvement in the Vietnam War, unless we do something sensible".

Rejecting pleas from Labor leader Simon Crean to "lead" the debate, Howard refused to speak at all, clearly awaiting Bush's response to the Iraqi statement. "I think at this stage we have to allow the diplomatic process to unfold," he stated lamely on commercial radio.

Howard left his hapless Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer—just back from attending the UN General Assembly—to state the government's case. Despite holding a meeting with the Iraqi UN ambassador in New York, Iraq's offer, issued just hours before the parliamentary session, caught Downer by surprise. He grafted a few paragraphs onto the start of his statement, welcoming Iraq's announcement as "a promising first step," then expressed the hope that "this is the start of a genuine diplomatic solution, a course Australia has always supported". Within 24 hours, Howard had ditched this line, echoing Bush's rejection of the Iraqi offer.

Downer's speech made it painfully obvious that the government has no evidence whatsoever to justify war on Iraq. All he could summon up was a two-year-old UN document, already available for public view on the Internet, listing alleged Iraqi breaches of UN resolutions imposed after the 1991 Gulf War. Downer added two fleeting references to unsubstantiated Australian intelligence reports—one that Iraq was trying to purchase materials that could be used to make weapons of mass destruction and one that Al Qaeda members had been seen in Iraq. Both claims are meaningless, given that almost any purchase of raw materials or technology could be attributed to weapons manufacture, while Al Qaeda members have been reported in numerous countries, including the United States.

Downer only underlined the lack of evidence by demanding that Saddam Hussein not be permitted to "reverse the onus of proof". Iraq, he insisted, had to disprove that it had the capacity

to produce weapons of mass destruction. By this standard, any country could be targeted for invasion.

Downer made the further mistake of alluding to the real purpose of the planned onslaught on Iraq—control over the country's vast oil supplies. He asserted that Australia had an important stake in the Middle East, "given the vital role that secure supplies of Middle Eastern oil play in the global economy". On the same day Downer spoke, Bush's economic adviser, Larry Lindsey, told the *Wall Street Journal* that "regime change" in Iraq would slash world oil prices and provide a fillip to the US economy.

Various media commentators tried to lend credence to the parliamentary proceedings by claiming that a basic divide had opened up between the government and Labor. "The fundamental differences between government and Labor Party approaches to international security issues emerged with stark clarity during yesterday's parliamentary debate on the Iraq crisis," wrote Geoffrey Barker in the *Australian Financial Review*. Whereas the government's approach was "starkly realist," Labor's was "classical liberal internationalism, focused on multilateralism," Barker claimed.

The truth is that, while chastising Howard for failing to "lead" the discussion as George Bush was doing in the US and Tony Blair in Britain, Labor leader Crean supports a US-led military campaign. In his carefully-crafted statement, he said: "If Iraq continues to frustrate UN efforts, and further action from the Security Council is not forthcoming, some countries may seek to invoke the provisions of article 51 of the UN charter, which acknowledges the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence against a clear and present danger."

Crean's only caveat was that the "clear and present danger" had to be based on some evidence linking Iraq to the terror attacks of September 11 or to an expansion of weapons of mass destruction posing a threat to security. Simple non-compliance with UN resolutions was insufficient. On this basis, he appealed to the government to "produce the extra evidence," pledging full support for war in that event. He concluded by embracing a plea issued by Howard for a bipartisan front. "If they do it [produce evidence], they will get our bipartisan support and we can move forward as a nation, as we should," Crean declared.

In the Senate, Labor combined with the Greens and Australian Democrats to pass a resolution accepting Downer's statement on Iraq with a Labor amendment that, "as yet, the case has not been made as would support a pre-emptive strike". By opposing the amendment, government senators demonstrated their commitment to a US first-strike attack; by using the words "as yet," the opposition parties displayed their willingness to agree in the near future.

At the same time, Labor senators voted with the government to reject Democrats and Greens amendments opposing the use of Australian military personnel in any invasion of Iraq and calling for a Senate inquiry into the issue. Likewise, in the House of Representatives, Labor opposed a motion by

Independent MP Peter Andren rejecting any Australian troop engagement "that is not carried out under a United Nations resolution".

While the parliamentary charade continued, Labor announced it would support the deployment of ground troops in any military action, dropping its previous policy in favour of offering only intelligence and logistical backing. Labor's defence spokesman Chris Evans endorsed Hill's proposed involvement of SAS troops. "Clearly, any Australian contribution would be a niche capability, most likely being our SAS and tanker aircraft."

The anti-war bluster by Labor MPs is motivated by concern that the Greens' statements against the war have attracted support. Opinion polls indicate that support for the Greens has doubled in recent months to 8 percent, their highest ever level. The *Melbourne Age* reported that Labor strategists were seeking "to identify with what they see as growing public unease with the government's support for the US". At a Labor caucus meeting, "MPs expressed concern that the Greens were outflanking Labor on the issue".

The parliamentary session, however, also served to expose the position of the Greens and Democrats. While they cautioned against a unilateral US strike, neither party ruled out backing a UN-approved attack. Brian Greig, the Democrats interim leader, told the Senate: "The Democrats will argue that a first strike is not the right response". He simply appealed to Howard not to commit troops without a parliamentary vote. Bob Brown, the Greens leader, condemned the US government for not acting earlier against Iraq. "There is no doubt that there needs to be an abiding by the United Nations Charter and resolutions by Saddam Hussein, as by everybody else including the United States. This dreadful despot Saddam Hussein has to be dealt with, and firmer action after 1998 was required."

During the Gulf War, while criticising the use of military force, the Democrats and Greens supported the imposition of UN trade and food embargoes against Iraq—sanctions that have contributed to the deaths of an estimated one million people, mostly children—and UN resolutions that have provided the formal justification for Washington's renewed onslaught.

For all the show of democratic discussion in parliament, no vote was taken on whether to send Australian forces. The government has made it clear that it will make the decision unilaterally, and call for parliamentary endorsement only after the event, once troops are already on their way. That is how the Hawke government proceeded in 1991, and Howard has declared his intention to follow suit.



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