

The Australian and the social catastrophe in Iraq

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With the pretexts and lies used to justify the war against Iraq now exposed, the Murdoch press in Australia has seized upon the so-called handover of sovereignty to promote a new lie: that the formation of the interim Iraqi government vindicates the “coalition of the willing” and marks a step toward the liberation of the Iraqi people.

The *Australian*, Murdoch’s national broadsheet, has played a particularly filthy role in backing the Howard government’s support for the criminal US-led war. Now, without any attempt to explain its past promotion of Washington’s propaganda, the newspaper stridently insists that life in “free” Iraq is fast returning to normality and prosperity.

The task of gathering the material to flesh out this editorial line has been assigned to correspondent Nicolas Rothwell. The veteran journalist has been handed the task of “spinning” events in Iraq so as to hide from readers of the *Australian* the reality of life in that country.

As the newspaper’s Middle East correspondent, Rothwell published his first article from Iraq, “The other side of a defiant country choked by war”, last Saturday. In it, he portrays a people contented with life under US domination. After describing the coalition forces’ nervousness prior to the handover of sovereignty, he writes: “[O]n the Baghdad streets as the big day nears, the language and the mood is different: anger, mingled with a strange hope. Almost everyone you meet and talk to rejoices in the new regime, and the coming of an independent Iraq, even as they fear the upheaval of the transition phase.

“In the upmarket district of Karada, close to the city’s heart, Ahmad, a businessman running a music shop, knows where he stands. ‘We have our own government now—we can work, and at last after the years of Saddam Hussein, we can rest our minds,’ he says.”

Later, Rothwell declares: “Now the transfer of authority will leave the country’s fate in the hands of Iraq’s new leaders. But their greatest support and strength will come from the Baghdad street, rather than their foreign backers.”

Contrary to Rothwell’s claims, recent opinion polls reveal that unelected prime minister and would-be strongman, Iyad Allawi, and his colleagues are widely distrusted and despised. A suppressed survey conducted by the Coalition Provisional Authority in May (subsequently leaked to Associated Press) found that the authority had the confidence of just 10 percent of the population. A mere two percent said that they considered the occupying troops to be liberators, with a majority reporting they would feel safer if the Americans withdrew immediately.

The claim of the *Australian* that the new “sovereign” government marks Iraq’s independence and transition to democracy constitutes yet another lie. The US authorities have carefully engineered the new interim government to act as a screen behind which they can maintain their domination of Iraq’s territory and resources. The new government is wholly dependent on US funding, and Iraqi oil remains under effective American control.

Coalition “advisors” have been appointed to every Iraqi ministry, each of which also has a carefully vetted Iraqi inspector-general. The prime

minister, an ex-Baathist and long-standing CIA collaborator, has suggested that among the first acts of his government could be the declaration of martial law.

Even without this measure, the new regime has the power to strictly limit the rights of political parties to contest elections, and to suppress any publication that opposes the occupation forces. The elections, which are due to be held next January, will be conducted under the watch of more than 150,000 foreign troops. If they are held at all, they will in no way reflect the genuine sentiments of the Iraqi people.

Rothwell’s article tries to portray a return to “normal life” in Baghdad, despite the ongoing war between the occupying forces and the Iraqi resistance. “The bombs and mortar shells explode in the middle distance with dull regularity,” he writes, “the Black Hawk and Apache helicopters cut fiercely through the sky—but there is another Baghdad, alongside the razor-wire and the fortified US army encampments. This is the real city, where foreigners don’t venture: the capital of a free, anarchic country, crowded, traffic-choked, in love with trade and shops and life.

“As the new order in Iraq faces its darkest challenge, with the handover of power looming next week, and a mounting wave of attacks and carnage in recent days, Baghdad is showing its true face: the face of an Iraq too busy for war, or factional feuding, the face of ordinary men and women too intent on building, arguing and getting by to stop for anything as trite as a mere security scare or explosions in the ‘green zone’ held by coalition forces at the city’s heart.”

In similar vein, Rothwell continues, “Concrete barriers and piles of masonry dot the streets, machinegun nests surround every ministry, but even amid this chaos the sweet, urgent pulse of Baghdad life beats on.”

While there is, without doubt, a definite layer of Iraqis benefiting handsomely from the occupation, as far as the majority is concerned, Rothwell’s account could not be further from the truth.

After 15 months of occupation, life for ordinary people is substantially worse than under the Hussein government. In other words, an appalling social regression has taken place—given the fact that life before the US-led invasion was already extraordinarily difficult after a decade of UN-backed sanctions, coupled with the corruption of the old regime.

The ongoing war being waged by the occupying forces against their opponents has created a permanent state of violence and fear. US forces launch raids on homes, fire on vehicles, and generally terrorise the population with impunity.

While coalition personnel barricade themselves in heavily fortified encampments, ordinary Iraqis face the constant threat of attack—from theft and extortion, to murder and kidnapping. Normal social and cultural life is impossible, and many Iraqis are effectively imprisoned in their own homes.

Life is dominated by the struggle to survive. An estimated 60 percent of Iraqi families are completely dependent on the monthly food ration distributed under the former UN-run “Oil for Food” program. Approximately one million children under the age of five are chronically

malnourished.

Only a tiny layer of Iraqis has benefited from the limited number of US-sponsored reconstruction projects, which are dominated by giant US corporations. Criminal elements have flourished, through the importation of smuggled consumer goods, such as cars and mobile phones, which remain beyond the reach of most people.

Unemployment is estimated at between 30 and 50 percent. On May 31, *USA Today* described what this means. "In every neighborhood, there are curbside hiring spots where manual workers can be had for 5,000 Iraqi dinars per day—less than \$4 at current exchange rates. In the al-Amal district [of Baghdad] recently, about 40 men milled about on a corner at 10am. Many had been there since dawn.

"Despair over the lack of opportunities is breeding anti-US sentiment. 'The Americans did nothing. They just removed Saddam and left us suffering twice as much,' said a scowling Jassim al-Jabouri, 50, a plasterer."

The extreme poverty has disastrous consequences for children, many of whose parents can no longer afford to send them to school. A *Christian Aid* survey in April found that two-thirds of children in Baghdad's eight poorest districts were not attending school full-time. Another non-governmental organisation reported working with large numbers of children suffering from behavioural and psychological problems, including aggression, depression and anxiety.

Iraqi civilians continue to face debilitating power blackouts, lasting as long as 14 hours a day. The Coalition Provisional Authority repeatedly promised that the country's electricity supplies would be increased to 6,000 megawatts by June 30. But capacity has remained at just 4,000 megawatts for months—less than the amount produced before the invasion.

The absence of any reliable power supply has its biggest impact in summer, when temperatures soar to 50°C. Families are forced to purchase power from individuals who own their own generators, just to secure basic necessities such as air-conditioning and refrigeration.

The power failures have damaged the already limited levels of production and industry. In February, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on the case of a carpentry shop owner who was unable to work for more than four hours a day, due to blackouts. Another grocery store owner estimated that he had lost hundreds of dollars because of spoiled meat and dairy products. The report quoted US officials saying that the blackouts could continue for another two years.

An investigation conducted by Public Citizen, a liberal lobbying group in the US, exposed the consequences of the power shortages on water and sanitation systems. The report described how the water received by one resident of Baghdad "during his two and a half hours a day of electricity is a concentrated cocktail of pesticides, fertilizers, heavy metals from antiquated piping, and unknown mounts of depleted uranium, raw sewage and other chemicals released from American and Iraqi munitions from the 1991 Gulf War, and the more recent Anglo-American invasion.

"It is no wonder he and his family are constantly plagued by diarrhea, with many of them suffering from kidney stones. And these are just the most obvious effects for the families in Sadr City [an impoverished section of Baghdad] who drink the contaminated water; heavy metals in their water also damage the liver, brain and other internal organs."

The lack of potable water has worsened Iraq's ongoing health crisis. After the fall of Baghdad, hospitals were ransacked and looted, and there remains a chronic shortage of medical equipment and staff. Many medicines are only available at exorbitant prices on the black market. Earlier this month, Associated Press reported on the state of Baghdad's General Teaching Hospital for Children, in which "children die each week from diarrhea because of poor sanitation, shortages of medical equipment and poorly trained staff. Diarrhea is common in the hot summer... Cockroaches roam hospital wards and pools of urine in the corridors are not unusual; toilets often overflow into the wards".

The complete absence of any significant US spending on health in the country is matched by Washington's failure to even begin to address the housing crisis. According to the UN's Integrated Regional Information Network news service, nearly one million new homes are needed for Iraq's internally displaced people. After the fall of Baghdad, between 70,000 and 100,000 people were forced out of their homes in northern Iraq alone. Nevertheless, the US authorities only began the first major housing construction project in early June.

While the coalition authority's incompetence and total lack of planning have certainly played their role, the devastation of Iraqi society is the inevitable result of the very nature of the US-led war. Far from its goal being "liberation", the invasion of Iraq was a neo-colonial attack on an impoverished country, motivated by the US desire to control the country's oil reserves and to win a strategic foothold in the region. The welfare of the Iraqi people has been of no more concern to the US ruling elite over the past 18 months than it was in the 1980s, when Hussein was a valued ally of American imperialism.

Former Iraqi pro-consul, Paul Bremer, underscored the real priorities of the occupying powers when he told the *Washington Post* that among his greatest accomplishments were "the lowering of Iraq's tax rate, the liberalisation of foreign investment laws and the reduction of import duties". Bremer's remark is reflective of the character of the Bush administration's agenda as a whole: to open Iraq's resources to American corporate interests, irrespective of the effects on the civilian population. Since the invasion in March, the occupation has effectively looted Iraq, leaving behind a trail of chaos and devastation for its people.

This is not what the *Australian* wants its readers to understand. On the contrary, the newspaper's coverage of the situation in Iraq amounts to direct censorship. With a federal election due within months, the Murdoch press is doing its best to ensure that the Iraq war, which is deeply opposed by the majority of the Australian population, does not become an election issue.



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