

# An exchange with the Australian's Iraq correspondent

14 October 2004

*The following is an exchange of correspondence on an article posted on the World Socialist Web Site on July 2 concerning media coverage at the time of the US handover of sovereignty in Iraq—"The Australian and the social catastrophe in Iraq".*

Hello Rick Kelly,

I am Nicolas Rothwell, the Aust's pro tem Mideast correspondent, although sadly I can't quite claim veteran status. I was a little puzzled by your reax to my Baghdad cover. No one has given me any line to spin. I am very far from being enthusiastic about the style and tone of the US occupation, which I like most journalists think has been very hamfisted. But my times in Baghdad, from which I have just again today returned, lead me to believe that Allawi is still not unpopular there; and there is a certain tide of optimism in some sections of the capital. I can only report what I see—and I try not to extrapolate too far. You will be aware working conditions for obviously western reporters are very difficult just now: it's not a straightforward thing being out on the streets. I was sad that the 4th Int, which I have always admired for its independence of thought, would reach for such weary cliches in dismissing news reports just because they figure in the Australian. Things in Iraq are rather complex and subtle, and Iraqis in Baghdad are fairly resilient. I'd have to say I still think the report you poured such scorn on got the mood in the sections of the city penetrable by me about right—and Iraqis I have asked agree. That mixed mood is still there. I guess you'll view this as a self-justifying reaction by the mainstream media; and obviously I don't really much care about being traduced in this way—but one does write in order to be read.

NR

Dear Mr Rothwell,

Thank you for letter regarding the *World Socialist Web Site's* article on your coverage from Iraq for the *Australian*.

Our article, "The *Australian* and the social catastrophe in Iraq", criticised your June 26 piece, "The other side of a country choked by war", for its selective and distorted portrayal of life in Baghdad. "Almost everyone you meet and talk to rejoices in the new regime, and the coming of an independent Iraq," you wrote, and went on to portray a people for whom life was rapidly returning to normal.

The WSWS argued that this presentation concealed the reality of the terrible social crisis affecting ordinary Iraqis, and provided cover for the lie of the Bush administration and its allies that the handover of sovereignty represented the definitive liberation of the Iraqi people and an important step toward the establishment of democracy in the country.

Your letter defends your assessment of broad Iraqi support for the regime led by Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. You write: "But my times in Baghdad ... lead me to believe that Allawi is still not unpopular there; and there is a certain tide of optimism in some sections of the capital." Every objective survey, however, shows deep hostility exists among masses of people toward the prime minister. A poll conducted in May by the Iraq Centre for Research and Strategic Studies asked Iraqis to rank 17 prominent political and religious leaders. Allawi finished sixteenth—less popular than everyone save Ghazi al-Yawer, the interim

regime's president. Among ordinary Iraqis, the prime minister is widely recognised as nothing more than a thug and US stooge, whose power is wholly dependent on the backing of the occupying forces.

Of course, there is no doubt that the interim government, like every other Quisling regime in history, is supported by a narrow stratum of Iraqi society. Amid the devastation inflicted by the invasion, there are those who depend on the interim government and the occupation forces for their employment, power and profits. And one would expect that these people are more readily accessible to foreign journalists than are ordinary Iraqis, very few of whom can enter the heavily fortified "Green Zone", where most reporters are confined.

As it turns out, however, your appraisal of Allawi's standing among ordinary Iraqis is based on nothing more than a limited interaction with a few people in Baghdad. "I can only report what I see—and I try not to extrapolate too far," you write. "You will be aware working conditions for obviously western reporters are very difficult just now: it's not a straightforward thing being out on the streets..." I still think the report you poured such scorn on got the mood in the sections of the city penetrable by me about right—and Iraqis I have asked agree".

But why are conditions so difficult for Western journalists in Iraq? It is, after all, a matter of no small significance that more than a year after Bush declared "mission accomplished", large swathes of the country remain war-zones. Your claim that "I can only report what I see" is simply false—the restrictions that journalists face in Iraq is itself an important issue that sheds light on the state of the US-led occupation. It is no accident that none of your articles attempted any assessment of the crisis confronting the occupying forces and their Iraqi stooges. This would have contradicted your portrait of a society quickly returning to normal.

For example, in "The other side of a country choked by war", you describe what you term the "real" Baghdad. "The bombs and mortar shells explode in the middle distance with dull regularity, 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". The only qualification you can muster is: "[t]hings in Iraq are rather complex and subtle, and Iraqis in Baghdad are fairly resilient".

There is an objective significance to what you choose to report and not report. Why not give your readers a sense of the appalling social conditions in Iraq—including the mass unemployment, ongoing electricity shortages, and near total absence of clean drinking water? How can the growing Iraqi insurgency possibly be explained without reference to the devastating social regression that has taken place under the occupation?

Your insistence that, "No one has given me any line to spin", entirely misses the point. The *Australian* has been a strident supporter of the Iraq war. It backed every lie and pretext issued from the Bush administration and the Howard government before the invasion, and has maintained ever since that the ongoing US-led occupation represents the "liberation" of

the Iraqi people. Why do you think you were selected to be the newspaper's Iraq correspondent? Allow us to suggest that it was precisely because, as your letter makes clear, you have no real objections to the war.

"I am very far from being enthusiastic about the style and tone of the US occupation," you tell us, "which I like most journalists think has been very hamfisted". Disagreement with the "style and tone" of the war does not represent a principled or critical standpoint. Nor does it in any way clash with the editorial line of the *Australian*.

You allege that the WWSW is guilty of "dismissing news reports just because they figure in the *Australian*." On the contrary, we examined your article in some detail because it provided a particularly graphic example of the political role performed by the Murdoch media as a whole, and the methodology that underlies much of its journalism.

Your letter, like your articles and dispatches, reveals the complete absence of any historical perspective that would facilitate an understanding of what the US occupation represents. Your method of journalism relies on a superficial empiricism, in which subjective impressions of what might be taking place immediately in front of you, replace a considered and objective analysis of events.

The consequences of such an approach are evident in your analysis of the ceremony that marked the formal handover of sovereignty by the US on June 28. This occurred in the context of a deepening crisis for the US-led regime. Mass hostility to the Coalition Provisional Authority, and growing resistance by ordinary Iraqis to the occupation, forced the Bush administration to ditch its previous plans for an extended period of direct US occupation, and instead create a nominally sovereign government. The "coalition of the willing" was also driven in its manoeuvres by domestic political concerns, as antiwar sentiment continued to develop. Like the Bush administration, the Howard government was desperate for a "good news story", and promoted the creation of the Allawi regime as proof of Iraqi "liberation". The mass media, and particularly the *Australian*, played a critical role in propagating this lie.

Before examining your assessment of the sovereignty handover, it is worthwhile briefly revisiting some of the events that marked this allegedly monumental shift in Iraq's political set-up. The ceremony itself demonstrated the absence of any mass support for the newly constituted government. The official proceedings were conducted inside the "Green Zone", and were attended by only a handful of Iraqis. With TV networks prohibited from broadcasting the proceedings live, and journalists' mobile phones confiscated, the Iraqi people only learned of their new "sovereignty" after it was announced from Turkey. Within two hours of the conclusion of formalities, the US administrator Paul Bremer had ignominiously departed the country on a secret flight.

Robert Fisk, of London's *Independent*, described the debacle in an article entitled "The handover: restoration of Iraqi sovereignty—or Alice in Wonderland?", on June 29. "Pitiful is the word that comes to mind," he wrote. "Here we were, handing 'full sovereignty' to the people of Iraq—'full', of course, providing we forget the 160,000 foreign soldiers whom the Prime Minister, Iyad Allawi, has apparently asked to stay in Iraq, 'full' providing we forget the 3,000 US diplomats in Baghdad who will constitute the largest US embassy in the world—without even telling the Iraqi people that we had changed the date. 'Few, save of course for the Iraqis, understood the cruellest paradox of the event. For it was the new 'Iraqi Foreign Minister' who chose to leak the 'bringing forward' of sovereignty in Iraq at the NATO summit in Turkey. Thus was this new and unprecedented date in modern Iraqi history announced not in Baghdad but in the capital of the former Ottoman empire which once ruled Iraq. Alice in Wonderland could not have improved on this. The looking-glass reflects all the way from Baghdad to Washington. In its savage irony Ibsen might have done justice to the occasion. After all, what could have been more familiar than Allawi's appeal to Iraqis to fight 'the enemies of the people'."

Your own interpretation of these events, in "Iraq's new face", published July 3, was radically different. "Often, in the most profound of revolutions, when nation-states are shaken to their core, it is the symbolism of events that counts—and so it has proved during the past 48 hours in the new Iraq, as a long oppressed people have swiftly taken charge of the lives and their shared future," your article began.

Later, it enthused: "Midweek, a new advertising campaign began, of the subtlest and most heart-beguiling kind. A blue logo, bearing the label Government of Iraq, stands beneath a photo of three little ceramic designs. One shows Iraq's outline. One shows a propitious bird's wing span, with script giving one of the hundred names of Allah. And one is a polygon, decorated with seven eye-like perforations... Men and women, seeing these familiar, beloved emblems, are touched to the core."

You went on to describe the reaction to Bremer's final interview on Iraqi television: "Everyday Iraqis, watching this, tears starting to their eyes, finally began to understand that the occupation was, if not over, at least entering a drastic new phase and that the US, for all the mistakes it has made in its year of running a shattered nation, was in fact fully determined to leave them in eventual control of their own destiny. The mood in the capital was transformed. It was as though the sense of freedom and its responsibilities one might have expected to come the day Saddam's statue fell from its plinth on Firdos Square was only now dawning".

To expose all the errors and absurdities contained in these passages would require a separate article. However, some obvious questions can be posed—if the formation of the Allawi regime was enthusiastically welcomed by so many Iraqis, why was the ceremony conducted in such secretive circumstances? Why were there no mass celebrations?

Perhaps the most important question is this: more than three months after the handover, to what extent has your claim that "a long oppressed people have swiftly taken charge of the lives and their shared future" been borne out by events? What does the situation in Iraq today reveal about the nature of the interim government, led by Allawi, whom you described as a "formidably tranquil figure and a long-time opponent of the old regime [who] speaks, in measured tones, the language of peace, democracy and human rights"?

Allow us to remind you that Allawi began his political career as a Baathist, who was reportedly the party's enforcer in Europe. In the mid-1970s he broke from the regime, only to begin work with MI6 and then the CIA. According to a *New York Times* article published in June, he was involved in a terrorist campaign aimed at destabilising the Hussein regime in the early 1990s. Former CIA operative, Robert Baer, recalled that one bomb attack "blew up a school bus; schoolchildren were killed". On July 17 the *Sydney Morning Herald* further reported that two separate witnesses had testified that Allawi murdered six detainees in June at the Al-Amariyah security centre, as US forces looked on.

The Iraqi prime minister has made it clear that his top priority is to crush all resistance to the occupation and to his government. Once in power, he immediately recruited former members of the despised Mukhabarat intelligence service, responsible for much of the torture and killings under the Hussein regime, and reconstituted the Iraqi army, with many of the old Baathist senior commanders restored to their former positions. After being in office for just ten days, he signed into law a sweeping range of measures authorising the imposition of martial law over the country. Soon after, the interim government reintroduced the death penalty for a wide range of offenses, including "endangering national security". The simultaneous closure of Al-Jazeera's offices signalled the regime's intention to suppress all critical reporting inside Iraq.

And what of your claim that the US is "in fact fully determined to leave [the Iraqis] in eventual control of their own destiny"? The handover of sovereignty has seen no let-up in the attacks of the US military against the Iraqi people. Centres of resistance to the occupation, most notably in

Fallujah, Najaf and Samarra, have been repeatedly assaulted by US tanks, artillery and fighter jets, killing and wounding thousands. The only discernable difference “sovereignty” has made is that these bloody operations now carry the rubberstamp of the interim government.

None of this has come as any surprise to the WSWS. Despite our limited resources, we have been able to provide a consistent and comprehensive analysis of every aspect of the war. This has only been possible because our articles are grounded on an objective understanding of the political and historical context within which the recent events in the Middle East have taken place.

The Iraq war can only be properly understood as the culmination of a protracted historical process. The pretexts of weapons of mass destruction and alleged Baghdad-Al Qaeda connections were used to justify the seizure of Iraq’s oil resources and the establishment of US military bases in the region. These aims were bound up with the US ruling elite’s broader strategy of global hegemony, which, as the National Security Strategy document of September 2002 made clear, entailed the subordination of the world’s economic resources to the interests of the US.

The deeply reactionary nature of the drive of US imperialism to out-muscle its European and East Asian rivals in the Middle East is reflected in the ongoing brutality of the occupying forces in Iraq. The escalating violence is not the result of insufficient pre-war planning or US “mistakes”. Rather, it follows the bloody logic of past neo-colonial occupations: every crime and act of repression carried out by the occupying forces not only fails to intimidate the subjugated people, but instead fuels their resistance.

The WSWS rejected from the outset the claim that the US military could act as a liberating force in Iraq. American imperialism has always cloaked its operations in humanitarian and pacifist garb. From the occupation of the Philippines after 1898, the numerous interventions in Latin America over the past half-century, to the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, every American military intervention is accompanied by denials that it is driven by mercenary or strategic imperatives. That the Bush administration’s claim to be bringing democracy to Iraq has been taken at face value by so many journalists, yourself included, speaks volumes about the historical myopia of the mass media today.

It is not clear from your letter precisely what you mean by our “weary clichés”. I suspect that you object to any reference to imperialism, neo-colonialism or the US ruling elite’s economic and strategic interests. But without these concepts, it is impossible to develop any serious understanding of the Iraq war, or, indeed, of any major international event today.

There are serious issues at stake. The war in Iraq is not an isolated or aberrant event, but an acute expression of the deepening social and economic crisis in the US. Irrespective of whether Bush or Kerry wins the presidential election in November, the eruption of US militarism will continue unabated. And the mass media, key accomplices in the terrible crimes being committed in Iraq, will continue to promote every lie used to justify the ongoing and open-ended “war on terror”.

If you are at all concerned about being identified with these crimes, you need to carefully consider your stance on the issues of principle we have raised.

Yours sincerely,  
Rick Kelly



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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