

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS: Iraq

Mr ANDREN (Calare) (12.03 p.m.)—The reasons why Australia should not be involved in any war on Iraq have been detailed in many quarters. The reasons why we should be involved have also been outlined but certainly not justified to the satisfaction of the overwhelming majority of Australians. The Prime Minister's statement has not satisfied that majority. Why, they ask, has Saddam Hussein become enemy No. 1 of the United States, Great Britain and Australia following September 11? With no link satisfactorily explained between the fundamentally opposed Baghdad regime and Osama bin Laden, is Saddam the king terrorist you have when you cannot find the real terrorist?

Australians are also asking: if the majority of the September 11 terrorists came from Saudi Arabia, why is that country not a candidate for regime change? Or is it? Indeed, what is the legitimacy of any leadership in the Arab League? Australians want to know whether regime change in Iraq is simply about putting in place another regime sympathetic to American, British and other interests in the Middle East—that means oil interests and pro-Israeli interests—with the current candidates to replace Saddam fraudsters and charlatans in their own right. They want to know why another 70,000 children, quite apart from thousands of innocent adults—give or take a few thousand—must die in any bombing attack on Iraq, either through pre-emptive strikes by America with British and Australian support or under the umbrella of a less-than-unanimous UN mandate forced on the Security Council. They want to know why this country has committed its defence forces to a war before military action has been declared and sanctioned by the only umpire we have—the UN Security Council.

In this place last September I moved an amendment to a not dissimilar motion to note a statement on Iraq from the foreign minister. I sought approval from this House for Australia not to be involved in any action in Iraq without United Nations endorsement. That was the overwhelming feeling of the Australian people then, and it remains so. My Independent colleague, the member for New England, was the only member to support that amendment and the ultimate vote, twisted as it was by procedures of the House and the cowardice of the government and opposition, to reflect the original, benign, non-binding motion. But the intent of my amendment was not lost on the Australian people, and it is to the shame of this place that we, as representatives, were not prepared to send a strong message to the electorate which reflected public opinion on this issue.

As we have seen, it suited the Prime Minister to not lock himself into a UN position, and that has been clearly demonstrated with the premature deployment of troops to the region without that UN support. The opposition has come on board the UN sanctioned position, but only with some ambivalence when faced with overwhelming public support for that position.

Before the Leader of the Opposition's contribution to this debate, the rhetoric of Labor on this issue was sickening—with the notable exception of the contributions of the members for Kingsford-Smith and Fremantle and a few others, including the member for Franklin. To its disgrace, the party watched the polls before it took any tentative steps to differentiate itself in any substantial way from the government. Where was the opposition

support for my amendment to the ministerial Iraq statement last September, calling for this House to not support our involvement in Iraq without specific UN Security Council sanction?

Alan Ramsey credits the member for Kingsford-Smith with turning Labor around, saying this week that Mr Brereton had become 'tired of the fog of words a timid Crean insisted on presenting as Labor policy on military action against Iraq'. Labor policy is now at least catching up with public opinion and has almost matched the Greens and Democrats in reflecting the opinion of the nation. I would like to read into the Hansard some of those sentiments from people in my electorate. Lyn Maciver from Mount David near Bathurst said:

Might alone, no matter how many missiles are deployed, will not win. The losers will be the innocent, as in the previous war against Iraq when an estimated 70,000 children under the age of 15 were killed ... The United States probably has the greatest arsenal of weapons of mass destruction, weapons which have been sold to many other nations and are now being turned back upon themselves.

Herman Hofman from Kelso said:

The billions of dollars we will spend on killing Iraqis need to be spent in Australia. Why use helicopters in Iraq to rain death on people who cannot help where they are born—

and who we will not help to become fellow citizens? Richard Hampton said:

How have we as a nation become such sabre rattlers? How do we get back the balance that was typical Oz not so many years ago?

Robert Muller from Cowra said:

I worry that George Bush seems obsessed with attacking Iraq regardless of what the UN or international community think. Australia should not align itself with this fanatical thinking ... it only adds to the paranoia that is being generated through certain sectors of the media and, I believe, in the government's latest advertising campaign.

Dennis Campbell emailed me from the Whitsundays in North Queensland, where the member for Dawson apparently seems to think—according to her recent ABC AM interview—that there is not a lot of opposition to Australia joining a pre-emptive strike against Iraq. Dennis Campbell wrote:

Last year Mr Howard said there would be no commitment by Australia to any conflict without the matter being debated or the public being consulted. Today without any mandate he is sending our defence personnel to the Middle East ... there is no justification for this action ... the argument of weapons of mass destruction is a fragile argument—as other events have shown, every farmer with a pallet of fertiliser in his shed is a potential terrorist.

Janelle Gervasconi from Wimbledon near Bathurst wrote:

I hope that the recent letters to the editor in the Western Advocate—

expressing overwhelming opposition to this war—

are a reflection of what people are feeling all over Australia.

I might add at this point that a continuing poll of readers of the *CentralWesternDaily* in Orange has consistently shown that opposition to Australia's involvement without UN approval is running at 87 per cent—having peaked at 91 per cent—saying no to being involved without any specific UN Security Council endorsement. Former Australian rugby captain and Cowra farmer John Thornett wrote to me and that paper, saying:

Howard, no matter how he falls back now, has made us a front line terrorist target and alienated our Muslim neighbours ... Iraq is not the remotest threat to Australia and little to anyone else. It has no link with Al Qaeda terrorism—remember it lost half a million young men in its war with fundamentalist Iran ... The US foreign policy record is appalling ... it has propped up corrupt and brutal regimes regularly in its own commercial interest. Its long pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian stance is at the heart of much of Islamic extremism.

Eric Tanner emailed:

Korea ... Vietnam ... Iraq ... all wars we had to have the USA told us; but did we? What does Australia have to gain when such a big percentage of our citizens are Moslems and peace-loving?

Linda Cormack from Glanmire near Bathurst wrote:

I cannot see how the combined resources of the Western World targeting poverty stricken Iraq could ever be seen as just.

Simon Francis of Lithgow posed some very pertinent questions about the United Nations. He asked:

... while the US is clearly over the top in some of their sabre rattling, there is a good case to be made for the total uselessness and corruption of the UN Security Council, and the UN itself.

This was one of the very few emails among more than a hundred messages that in any way suggested that regime change in Iraq might be the best course, and I replied:

Of course the UN is corrupted—

the permanent members of the Security Council all have weapons of mass destruction and, indeed, an interest in the fortunes of Iraq—

However, if America is to be the policeman of the world, and not the United Nations, however imperfect, then we endorse regime change anywhere, any time.

Let me remind the House of the words of Robert Fisk in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 21 February 1998 when he said:

It is as well to remember that the real trials in the Middle East, the real potential explosion, is in the collapse and death of the Oslo peace process, a calamity that has left Israelis and Arabs on the brink of war with each other ... the crisis over weapons inspection in Iraq has served to divert attention from this colossal blunder in US foreign policy. Washington betrayed the Arab states by persuading them to accept an Israeli-Arab peace and then letting Israel go on building Jewish settlements on stolen Arab land.

There is now no Western-Arab coalition against Iraq, just a bunch of Christian armies poised to attack a Muslim state—to the suppressed fury of the rest of the Arab world.

Fisk reiterated those sentiments on the SBS program Dateline last night, and I would urge everyone to obtain a copy of the transcript of that interview. Those words of Fisk's are as valid now as they were when written five years ago—well before September 11—and they are valid notwithstanding September 11.

Only a foreign policy even-handedness from the West will begin to deny terrorism the oxygen it requires. Australia once had a chance to display that even-handedness, but we have thrown that away by engaging in America's determination to reconfigure the Middle East in its own image. We are being asked to believe new evidence from Colin Powell alleging definite Saddam-al Qaeda links when a British intelligence report that was leaked overnight says that there are no links. In fact, the secular Saddam regime and fundamentalist al-Qaeda have incompatible ideologies.

Russia asks why any photographic evidence of weapons sites has not been made available to the inspectors before. France says that wider inspections and more inspectors are needed. That surely is a reasonable ask. Let us remember that any hiding places would contain material derived from original supplies obtained from the US and, indeed, other members of the Security Council. What guarantees have we that the major powers will not resort again to providing weapons development assistance similar to that provided by the USA and others in the first place to Iraq? The Prime Minister said:

The only hope of a peaceful solution will be if the Security Council acts clearly, decisively and unambiguously.

Does this mean that the Prime Minister says that the only hope for peace is war? To test this parliament's commitment I propose to move an amendment to the motion before the House, which at the moment is: 'That the House take note of the paper'. I move:

That the following words be added to the motion:

“and insists that in the absence of specific, unambiguous and unanimous support of the United Nations Security Council, Australian defence forces not be involved in any military action in Iraq”.

I, and indeed the Australian people, demand that this debate not be cynically and cowardly adjourned before my amendment is dealt with. We must at least put this rider on any military commitment we make to Iraq. The Australian people demand this, and this parliament should determine that. Let us not see the sort of cowardice we saw last September.

Personally, I would not support our going to war in any circumstances, unless we or our allies were directly attacked. But I respect those who believe a proper—and I say `proper'—UN Security Council resolution is the best means of determining whether action should be taken to disarm Saddam. Let me remind the House of the article in the current issue of Foreign Policy by Harvard University's Stephen Walt. He says that the historical record shows Saddam can be effectively contained, even if Saddam has nuclear weapons—which is highly unlikely—just as the US contained the Soviet Union with its 46,000 nuclear weapons during the Cold War. Walt also rejects suggestions that Saddam would arm al-Qaeda with nuclear weapons if he had them. He also poses the question: apart from the fact that the secular Iraqi state has little in common with Islamic fundamentalists, like al-Qaeda and especially Iran—something confirmed by the UK intelligence report leaked overnight—why would Saddam risk losing control of those weapons and risk detection and certain retaliation at that point? I am against our involvement in this conflict under any circumstances. It is not a declared war; it is a pre-emptive strike, whether it has UN endorsement or not. But I am happy to move the amendment to reflect the assurance that millions of Australians seek: that the UN Security Council's permanent five, as one, need to support any action against Iraq.

I have tried to reflect the views of some in my electorate, many of whom will gather in Canberra on Thursday next week, 13 February, at noon outside parliament—the last sitting day before a likely war—to express the overwhelming feeling in country New South Wales that this war is wrong and is certainly not our war. Let me close with the words of Bev and John McClaren of Oberon:

We most sincerely desire that our Nation, Australia, be agents of world peace, not protagonists of conflict.

Interjection

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Hon. B.C. Scott)—Is the amendment seconded?

Interjection

Mr Windsor—I second the amendment and reserve my right to speak.