

Press Club Address - 18 March, 2003

It's important to remember that the onus is always on those who argue for war. They need to demonstrate a casus belli or just cause. There is no need to mount an argument against the use of violence, unless peace and order are regarded as undesirable conditions.

So do the Howard Government's arguments for war meet the necessary burden of proof? I say arguments in the plural, because they vary from day to day. I will focus on the two most recent and then say a few words about the UN.

First, the so called 'humanitarian argument.' On commercial radio last week Prime Minister Howard asked a caller: "...how many tens of thousands of innocent people will die if Saddam Hussein's regime continues? Are you aware of the tens of thousands and in terms of the wars in which he's been involved and started up, more than a million people that have died, are you aware of the 200,000 odd people who've gone into the prison system and disappeared over the years?"

There is no disputing the brutal nature of Saddam Hussein's regime, but where were Mr Howard's or Mr Downer's concerns in the late 1980s when Saddam Hussein was at the peak of his crimes? A cursory glance at Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch reports for this period would have given them plenty of opportunities to express their outrage in the Parliament. Why didn't they? If they had even heard of the Kurdish village of Halabja - which was gassed by Saddam in March 1988 - before September last year, they might have been taken more seriously now.

Are we to assume from Mr Howard's belated discovery of Saddam's wickedness that sovereignty is no longer a protection against attack from outsiders who don't like the nature of another government's rule. If so, this principle will overturn the UN Charter, international law more generally and revolutionise international relations. Is this what the Prime Minister wants?

It does seem a strange argument to raise in support of war given that, despite the abhorrent nature of his rule - which the PM has taken to adumbrating lately - Mr Howard has said that Saddam can stay on to keep behaving this way if he gives up his WMD.

A war will kill many innocent civilians. Mr Howard's response is a "what if" scenario - namely that "doing nothing about Iraq, potentially, is much more costly than using force, if necessary, to ensure Iraq's disarmament." This is both wildly hypothetical and morally suspect. As British philosopher Ted Honderich has said, "there is no parity between our doing something with the dead certainty of killing and maiming thousands, and not doing it with only the probability that some people will suffer."

Secondly, the PM has argued that if rogue states are permitted to keep or develop WMD, they are more likely to pass them on to terrorist groups. Containment hasn't worked against Iraq, so Baghdad must be forcefully disarmed.

Proliferation of WMD is a global problem, but if the PM is genuinely worried he should direct his concerns to the proliferators - his government friends in Washington and London which licensed the technologies to Saddam in the 1980s (even after his use of chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and Kurdish villagers) and the 150 or so Western companies which sold him the technologies to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons (he might have some trouble getting the list of companies because Washington excised them from Iraq's weapons declaration last December before things got even more embarrassing). Baghdad is the recipient and beneficiary of proliferation, not a disseminator of weapons. Ditto for North Korea.

Mr Howard clearly doesn't understand what "containment" means. It's not about preventing countries acquiring weapons but preventing states from using them. Mr Howard said containment hasn't worked with Saddam, so he needs to explain what has prevented the Iraqi leader from passing WMD to terrorists at any time over the last twenty years (or since the West sold him the materials). If not containment, what?

Under the most intrusive surveillance ever conducted on a nation, it would be difficult to brandish a pocket knife in Iraq these days without it being captured by satellite imagery. Saddam is militarily much weaker now than he has ever been. And as the CIA and other intelligence agencies have argued, the only circumstances in which he is even likely to deploy his WMD - if in fact he has them - is if he life and regime are threatened.

In the absence of any plausible Iraq-Al Qaeda connection, the PM has spoken vaguely of Saddam's long standing support for terrorists. He seems to regard terrorism as a generic term, and makes no distinction between Al Qaeda and those groups which are struggling to evict Israel from illegally occupied Arab lands. This is absurd, unless you consider Nelson Mandela a terrorist because he once headed up Umkhonto we Sizwe - the military wing of the ANC. Is anyone who takes up arms to achieve political goals a terrorist, or does it depend on their cause? To suggest that Saddam's support for secular Palestinian groups is no different to backing an Islamic militant outfit like Al Qaeda, in a lazy, inaccurate and unconvincing conflation.

It's also incredibly hypocritical given that Canberra has just announced its intention to re-establish closer ties with Indonesia's Special Force - Kopassus, which is currently fomenting state-sponsored terrorism in conjunction with Islamic militants such as Laskar Jihad in Aceh and West Papua.

Thirdly, the PM and others claim that the very future of the UN is at stake because it won't do the bidding of a few Western states on Iraq - hence it became the subject of an ultimatum by 3 of its 193 members. However, we are not told why the organisation's credibility wasn't in question when it betrayed the people of West Papua in 1969, Bosnia in 1993, Rwanda in 1994, East Timor in 1999, Palestine continuously since 1948, etc, etc,. Or why the enforcement of SC resolutions against Iraq a condition of the UN's future credibility but not when longer standing resolutions - much longer than 12 years - against Israel and Turkey are defied without any implications for the UN? We have not been told that,

of the 13 vetos exercised in the SC since 1990, 9 have been cast by the US - 7 of them to protect Israel from international law - often in a 14-1 vote.

Given that the PM was so careful to obtain Security Council authorisation before sending Australia's InterFET contribution into East Timor in 1999, his impatience with the SC on Iraq seems strange. In the case of East Timor, Mr Howard refused to pre-deploy peacekeepers prior to the independence ballot and was even prepared to wait for Jakarta's permission for Australian troops to enter the territory even though the UN did not recognise Indonesia's authority in East Timor and a humanitarian crises was already underway. At least Baghdad is the legal administering authority in Iraq, though this has not discouraged Mr Howard from pre-deploying troops on its borders or waiting for clear UN SC authority for war.

Today we have seen a savage attack on the UN and multilateral diplomacy. By refusing to proceed with their SC resolution and committing to war, the 'coalition of the willing' have exposed their political isolation on this issue, the extent to which they are out of step with global opinion, they have undermined the weapons inspectors for the second time, and shown they will only embrace the UN if it agrees in advance to do what they tell it to.

In conclusion, its not just the absence of a convincing moral or legal case for war that should concern us. There is also the likely catastrophic effects of a war in Pakistan, on the West Bank and in Indonesia. But if you want to truly measure the folly of this war, look at Iraq's northern border with Turkey. Not only have the Iraqi Kurds, many of whom live under the northern no-fly zone, indicated that they will not give up their autonomy to a post-Saddam leadership group, they have indicated that their principle threat is an invading Turkish army, which may still enter the country in conjunction with US and UK forces. In other words, they regard Turkey, rather than Saddam, as their enemy.

The Turkish Government has indicated that a quid pro quo for allowing US troops to enter Iraq from Turkish soil would be a significant say in a post-Saddam Government in Baghdad. And they may invade the country regardless. We all know what this will mean for the Kurds, who may take the opportunity afforded by the conflict to declare independence - with all the implications that will have for brothers and sisters in Iran, Turkey and Syria. Meanwhile, the Iraqi exiles who hope to soon be in power in Baghdad, have said they will not accept a US military governor as an interim ruler of the country. Of course the Shi'ite majority in the country may not accept them and are unlikely to have even heard of them - initially they will be busy settling old scores with the Sunnis who have ruled Iraq for decades.

One doesn't get the impression that anyone in Washington, London or Canberra has even thought this through - or a number of other scenarios of equivalent complexity. This is the most terrifying thought of all. Thank-you.

