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MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Foreign Affairs: Iraq

SPEECH

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Senator HARRIS (Queensland) (5.27 pm)—In response to the statement made to the parliament by the Hon. Alexander Downer MP, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the question is: should Australia be involved with a war on Iraq? Today we pause to debate Australia becoming involved in a war on Iraq and, at present, One Nation's views are in accord with the present views of the foreign minister—and I stress the 'present' views of the foreign minister. He said:

... we are still in a diplomatic phase, with the objective of persuading Iraq to comply with its United Nations' obligations. We are not at the stage of making decisions about possible military commitments.

As a political party, we truly try to represent the wishes of the Australian people, and I am pleased to draw on the opinions of the constituents of Queensland and those of Australians more widely in feedback that I have received in relation to the war on Iraq.

At this stage, the US has not made a decision to take military action and Australia has not been invited to participate in any military action. To this end, I see an opportunity for true consultation with the Australian people. I am pleased to announce that my office is seeking the input of the Australian people and encouraging them to contact it to express their views either for or against the military action in Iraq. One Nation would support a conscience vote in the parliament on any possible military action against Iraq and we would also support a referendum seeking the views of the Australian people. One Nation fully supports exhausting all diplomatic efforts in an attempt to resolve the current international crisis. We would be supportive of UN sanctioned military forces against Iraq and we believe that we should be prepared to act quickly and decisively if called upon by the UN. However, our capacity to contribute to any international coalition must be within the existing limitations of our defence forces.

There are several important factors that international actors need to consider in relation to possible military action against Iraq. The first is Iraq's program involving weapons of mass destruction. The first UN Security Council resolution regarding Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was made in April 1991—over a decade ago. There remain today many unknowns in relation to Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

Anthony Cordesman from the Centre of Strategic and International Studies has pointed out:

We have no way to determine how lethal Iraqi biological weapons are or to deal with the possible use of infectious agents like smallpox. Iraq has no way of mass testing such weapons. It will not know the lethality of what it uses until it uses it.

We face the possibility of discovering how dangerous Iraq is only when it uses its weapons. Our great dilemma is that no-one can know whether or when Iraq will truly become a massive lethal threat. There is no predictable date, no time of 'imminent danger' and no clear line in the sand.

The second factor to consider is the role of the UN and the enforcement of, and failure by offending states to comply with, UN resolutions. Clearly, the UN needs to carry out its decisions. As an international body, it cannot be relegated to the status of a paper tiger. Many countries, including Australia, make considerable financial contributions to the UN and we expect the UN to do its job. Australia has nil debt owing to the UN Regular Budget. Our contribution for 2000-01 was \$A29,275,000. The United States, however, has outstanding debt to the UN of \$US446 million as at 30 June 2002. Iraq has not met its dues for some time.

Another factor for consideration is the world financial implications of a war. The International Monetary Fund has warned that the West's fragile stock market could be plunged into fresh turmoil by a campaign to topple Saddam Hussein. Although our Treasurer reassures us that the economic outlook is good, Australia could be adversely affected by a downturn in world financial markets. The impact upon the world economy raises another very important factor, and that is the control of the world's oil supplies. As the *Washington Post* has acknowledged, a US-led ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could open a bonanza for American oil companies long banished from Iraq, thereby scuttling oil deals between Baghdad and Russia, France and other countries, and reshuffling world petroleum markets.

Since the Persian Gulf War in 1991, companies from more than a dozen nations, including France, Russia, China, India, Italy, Vietnam and Algeria, have either reached or sought to reach agreements in

principle to develop Iraq's oilfields, refurbish existing facilities or explore undeveloped tracts. Most of the deals are on hold until the lifting of the UN sanctions. But with the ending of sanctions that would likely come with Saddam Hussein's ousting, companies such as ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco would almost assuredly play a role. There is not an oil company out there that would not be interested in Iraq.

I would like now to make some brief comments on Australia's capacity to support another war. In terms of deploying troops to the Gulf, we should bear in mind that the Australian Defence Force has two major overseas deployments at the moment: its contribution to the United Nations peacekeeping mission in East Timor, which involves approximately 1,400 personnel; and its contribution to the coalition against terror, which is not a United Nations-run operation and which involves approximately 1,550 personnel. There were commitments to other operations as at June 2002. The average strength of the permanent Australian Defence Force for 2000-01 was just on 51,000. That includes support personnel as well as those who might be involved in direct combat. If diplomatic options are exhausted and Australia commits to a war with Iraq, we need to have a thorough assessment, public debate and disclosure regarding the capabilities of our defence forces and the extent of their participation.

Given that we are a friend and ally of the US and that Australia is host to US bases that are critical for its signals intelligence, we need to consider Australia's position if a pre-emptive strike were launched. As always, One Nation's concern is for the welfare of our citizens. Is Australia prepared to deal with any potential reprisals? Do we have sufficient resources to combat the threat of biological, chemical or nuclear attack? Disaster plans would have to be activated. Emergency Management Australia would be involved, and perhaps even the ADF—again, a drain on our military resources which could be deployed overseas.

We also need to be mindful of possible reprisals against other Middle Eastern nations. This is another reason why a diplomatic solution is the best option. Diplomacy should be Australia's first choice in any looming conflict. At this point One Nation's views are in accord with the government's views. We are still in a diplomatic phase, with the objective of persuading Iraq to comply with its UN obligations; we are not at the stage of making decisions about possible military commitments. Iraq is not stronger in the world because of its weapons of mass destruction; it is weaker because of its vulnerability to attack. We pray that our fragile planet will not be racked by another war and that a diplomatic solution will prevail. One Nation supports a diplomatic solution to the Iraq situation. If Australia is requested to contribute to a military force, that decision

should and must be made by the Australian people—that is, by a consensus of the people of each state and a majority of states. The decision should not be made for political or economic reasons.