Iraq

SPEECH

Tuesday, 4 February 2003

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr HOWARD (Bennelong—Prime Minister) (2.49 pm)—Mr Speaker, my purpose today is to explain to the House and through it to the Australian people the government's belief that the world community must deal decisively with Iraq; why Iraq's continued defiance of the United Nations and its possession of chemical and biological weapons and its pursuit of a nuclear capability poses a real and unacceptable threat to the stability and security of our world; why the matters at stake go to the very credibility of the United Nations itself; why the issue is of direct concern to Australia and why, therefore, the Australian government has authorised the forward positioning of elements of the Australian Defence Force to the Persian Gulf.

Although there is considerable debate about the best course of action to resolve this crisis I want, for a moment, to focus on the one thing that unites us all—and that is a common abhorrence of war.

I know that in this I speak for every member of this House, every Australian. We, all of us, hope that it will still prove possible to find an outcome acceptable to the international community without military force being used. The government will not make a final decision to commit to military conflict unless and until it is satisfied that all achievable options for a peaceful resolution have been explored.

The other point of agreement shared by members in this House, by our community and by the community of nations is that Iraq must not be allowed to possess weapons of mass destruction—for the security and stability of our world, it must be disarmed.

For years the nations of the world have sought to persuade Iraq to abandon these most offensive of weapons. The Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, has refused to comply and now the weight of the world's attention has fallen on him.

Only one nation can determine whether force will be necessary or not. Only one nation, acting alone, can make the choice for peace. That nation is Iraq.

Full disclosure by Iraq of its chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs and immediate and total cooperation by Iraq with the provisions of resolution 1441 of the Security Council will remove the need for military action.

In his report to the Security Council, Dr Hans Blix, the head of the United Nations weapons inspection body for Iraq, made it clear where he believed that the responsibility for the current terrible impasse lay, and I quote:

Iraq appears not to have come to a genuine acceptance—not even today—of the disarmament, which was demanded of it and which it needs to carry out to win the confidence of the world and to live in peace.

Of at least one thing we can all be absolutely certain—if the world turns its back on the threat posed by Iraq, if the community of nations gives up because it is all too hard, then Saddam Hussein will not reward us all with benign behaviour.

Such weakness, such an abject failure of international will, will—as in the past—be treated with contempt.

Iraq will not only keep her current weapons but add to them. Saddam Hussein will not abandon his chemical and biological weapons programs. He will keep striving to build a nuclear capacity. And he will almost certainly, at some time in the future, use these weapons to fulfil his ambition to dominate his region.

Given his aggressive history, who could blame his neighbours, when faced with an Iraq allowed to keep, through the default of the international community, weapons of mass destruction, if they decided that their own security necessitated a corresponding arsenal.

Worse still, other rogue states observing the world community's failure to deal with Iraq will be encouraged to flout the international conventions on arms control and develop their own chemical, biological and even nuclear weapons.
We should all be deeply concerned about a world in which weapons of mass destruction become the norm. The more nations that possess these weapons, the greater the risk there is that they will be used. The likelihood of them falling into the hands of terrorists multiplies as their numbers proliferate. Proliferation of these weapons will make the world a much more dangerous place for all of us.

Through failure to deal once and for all with Iraq, the world will have effectively given a green light to the further spread of these weapons and will have further undermined the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and the conventions on chemical and biological weapons which the world—and not least Australia—has worked so hard to build over the last 30 years or more.

At the heart of this debate must be a recognition of the threat posed to the security of the world through the progressive breakdown of the international covenants against proliferation of nuclear weapons and the spread of chemical and biological weapons.

The world has developed over time a series of treaties, conventions, protocols and control regimes both to prevent the proliferation of chemical, nuclear and biological weapons and, where possible, to eliminate such of these weapons as may now exist.

Australia is vehemently opposed to the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons. We do not possess these weapons and we wish to ensure that they do not become an acceptable part of every nation's arsenal. They are too dangerous. Their destructive power is hundreds of times greater than that of conventional weapons—terrible as they may be. Their destructive force is not easily contained or controlled and their effects can span the generations. These are no ordinary weapons.

Every time a nation is allowed to undermine the international treaties and agreements put in place to restrict or prohibit the spread of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, the world becomes more dangerous for all nations.

Australia—under both coalition and Labor governments—has been a staunch supporter and active proponent of multilateral action to stop the spread of these weapons.

We, therefore, have a direct and lively interest in ensuring that the international order against the spread of such weapons is not eroded but rather reinforced.

It is true that too many nations already include weapons of mass destruction in their armouries. Other nations have developed nuclear weapons—but only two stand accused of breaching the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty: Iraq and North Korea.

Iraq has been thumbing its nose at the United Nations persistently and publicly for 12 years. In North Korea's case the extent of its breach of international commitments has only recently become apparent.

The international community, with Australia playing a leading role, has begun to deal with North Korea. The security of our region and that of the broader world demands that North Korea be brought back into compliance with the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty.

It is ludicrous to suggest, as some have, that because Australia wants the Iraqi issue resolved, then we are passive or indifferent about North Korea. Both pose great threats to world security. Both are of intense interest to Australia. It is not a question of choice—both must be dealt with.

I pose the simple question. What hope does the world have of dealing peacefully and effectively with North Korea if the Security Council is seen to deal supinely with Iraq?

Just as we accept without reservation that stability in North Asia is crucial to our economy and our security, we must recognise that the Middle East is not remote or irrelevant to Australia.

Australia is home to several hundred thousand people of Middle Eastern background. Some are from Iraq, and we appreciate the contribution of all of these people to our nation. Many of them could be torn between seeing Saddam brought to account and the possible dangers facing their families in Iraq. During this time, they will need our compassion and our support, and I hope that all Australians will ensure that this is offered.

For almost 20 years, Iraq has been a constant threat to its neighbours. If Iraq emerges from its current confrontation with world opinion with its arsenal of chemical and biological weapons intact, the potential for
Saddam Hussein's aggression against his neighbours to be renewed will be greatly enhanced. Iraq will again feel free to coerce and intimidate countries in the region.

The old policy of containment is eroding. Saddam Hussein has increasingly been able to subvert the sanctions. Smuggling of oil from Iraq and the illegal importation of proscribed goods into Iraq have increased dramatically in the past few years.

Despite the efforts earlier of the weapons inspectors—who destroyed far more of Iraq's weapons programs than Saddam Hussein ever expected—Iraq has still been able to hang on to most of the knowledge and equipment it needs.

Inspectors have never been able to eradicate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction programs—at best they slowed their development.

There will be no stability—no security—for the nations of the Gulf until Iraq is disarmed of its weapons of mass destruction—totally and permanently.

Disarming Iraq will bring enormous benefits to the Middle East and will be widely welcomed.

Clearly, however, the international community must redouble its efforts to resolve the seemingly intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Australian government again calls on both sides to bring an end to the violence affecting Israelis and Palestinians. Neither side should make the mistake of alienating, through violence, those who are willing and ready to negotiate a settlement.

Israel has no stauncher ally than Australia in its pursuit of the right to exist within secure and internationally recognised boundaries.

Australia strongly supports the creation of a viable independent Palestinian state.

It remains a great tragedy that the courageous efforts of Ehud Barak, the former Prime Minister of Israel, who offered the Palestinians the great bulk of their demands, were ultimately repudiated by the Palestinian Chairman, Yasser Arafat.

As a genuine friend of Israel's, I urge Ariel Sharon to use the authority of his re-election to take whatever opportunity might reasonably arise to engage the Palestinian Authority in constructive peace discussions.

He should facilitate all bona fide international attempts to bring the parties together.

Can I, however, say this to the members of the Palestinian Authority.

How can the Prime Minister of Israel be expected to do these things while ever the murderous pattern of suicide bombing continues to be inflicted on the people of Israel?

In the end result, however, any action taken against Iraq must be justified on its own merits. It will not and cannot be predicated on whether or not other challenges to world security have been addressed.

The overriding concern about Iraq is its record of aggression and willingness to use weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein clearly does not see them as weapons of last resort. He has used them against his neighbours. He has used them against his own people.

This is a doleful distinction, which Iraq shares with no other country.

Iraq has form. Saddam Hussein has without provocation invaded Iran and Kuwait. He has fired missiles at Saudi Arabia, Israel, Bahrain and Qatar. He has bullied, threatened and extorted Syria, Jordan and the Gulf States.

Who knows what other horrors might have been perpetrated on the Kurds or the Shia Muslims if not for the no-fly zones which Britain and the United States have enforced for these last 12 years.

Iraq also has a long history of training and supporting regional terrorist groups. It supports Palestinian suicide bombers who have caused such death and destruction within Israel.
Iraq's history of relationships with and support for terrorist organisations magnifies our concerns. The rise of international terrorism adds a new and frightening dimension to the threat posed by the proliferation of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

The ultimate nightmare for us all must be that weapons of mass destruction fall into the hands of terrorists. The more the world leaves unchecked either the possession of such weapons by rogue states or the spread of those weapons, the more likely it becomes that terrorists will acquire and use them.

It cannot be stressed too strongly, Mr Speaker, that all of this is added to the fact that Iraq has flouted with impunity the resolutions of the Security Council of the United Nations.

The Australian government knows that Iraq still has chemical and biological weapons and that Iraq wants to develop nuclear weapons.

We share the view of many that, unless checked, Iraq could, even without outside help, develop nuclear weapons in about five years.

Even before the report of the head of the United Nations weapons inspection body there was compelling evidence to support these beliefs within the published detailed dossiers of British and American intelligence.

On the basis of the intelligence available, the British Joint Intelligence Committee judged that:

- Iraq has a useable chemical and biological weapons capability, which has included recent production of chemical and biological agents;
- Iraq continues to work on developing nuclear weapons—uranium has been sought from Africa that has no civil nuclear application in Iraq;
- Iraq possesses extended range versions of the Scud ballistic missile in breach of Security Council resolutions, which are capable of reaching Cyprus, Turkey, Teheran and Israel;
- Iraq's current military planning specifically envisages the use of chemical and biological weapons. In its view, Saddam Hussein is determined to retain these capabilities.

The analysis provided by the Director of the US Central Intelligence reached similar conclusions, namely:

- Iraq is reconstituting its nuclear weapons program;
- it has begun renewed production of chemical warfare agents, probably including mustard, sarin, cyclosarin and VX;
- all key aspects—R&D, production and weaponisation—of Iraq's offensive biological weapons program are active and most elements are larger and more advanced than they were before the Gulf War in 1991.

The intelligence material collected over recent times, to which Australia has contributed, points overwhelmingly to Saddam Hussein having acted in systematic defiance of the resolutions of the Security Council, maintained his stockpile of chemical and biological weapons and sought to reconstitute a nuclear weapons program.

Given the strong and critical language of the Blix report, the nations which comprise the Security Council face a stark and difficult choice.

The council must either act to ensure full compliance by Iraq with resolution 1441 or, through either excessive delay or indifference, risk crippling its own authority.

To emphasise the weight of responsibility which rests upon the current members of the Security Council, it is worth recalling to the House some brief history of this matter.

In 1991, the United Nations Security Council wanted to ensure that the Iraqi President was no longer in a position to launch any more unprovoked attacks on his neighbours. It resolved that Iraq must declare and then destroy all its chemical and biological weapons and any materials or facilities connected with Saddam's attempt to achieve nuclear capability. Iraq was prohibited from ever again possessing such weapons.
Saddam Hussein agreed to disarmament—to allow the United Nations to supervise and record the destruction of his arsenal of chemical and biological weapons and his nuclear capacity.

On this basis, and this basis alone, the world community agreed to cease hostilities against Iraq in April 1991. Iraq was allowed to maintain a conventional force—no-one questions Iraq's right as a sovereign nation to protect itself by maintaining conventional defensive weapons.

The cease-fire effectively was conditional on Iraq continuing to comply with the terms laid down by the Security Council—including, and importantly, the commitment to renounce weapons of mass destruction. To ensure compliance, the United Nations determined to continue economic sanctions against Iraq.

For 12 years the community of nations has tried to cajole and encourage Iraq to comply with the Security Council resolutions.

For 12 years the international community has tried to contain his ambitions and limit his capacity to keep or manufacture weapons of mass destruction.

For 12 years Australian navy personnel have supported the Multinational Interception Force in the Persian Gulf, which enforces sanctions against Iraq—the crew of HMAS Kanimbla, which was farewelled on 23 January, are our most recent contribution to this important operation.

For eight years the Iraqi President obstructed the weapons inspection teams, who were charged with verifying his compliance with the UN resolutions. And for the last four years, until December 2002, he refused the inspectors entry to Iraq.

Iraq has not complied with 24 out of the 27 provisions contained in successive Security Council resolutions. Over the last 12 years the Security Council has passed no fewer than nine resolutions condemning Iraq's non-cooperation with weapons inspectors. Iraq has had a lot of time and plenty of opportunities to get it right.

The government has consistently argued that the United Nations needs to deal with Saddam Hussein's continued defiance of the Security Council's authority.

This was the view I put to President Bush shortly before his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, in September last year. I then argued to him the merits of working through the United Nations.

That has been the steady theme of a strong diplomatic effort by Australia, ably led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

We have supported a leading role for the United Nations in addressing this threat. Our close relationship with and our ready access to the US administration have meant that our views are heard and respected.

We approached Security Council members in capitals and in New York to encourage a constructive resolution. We recently sent an envoy to South-East Asia to consult key partners in the region and inform them of Australia's position.

The foreign minister's consultations in Europe last week demonstrated we are not alone, neither in our concern, nor in our preparedness, ultimately to act if necessary.

On 8 November last year, the Security Council passed resolution 1441. The nations which comprise the council, large and small, from all the regions of the world, of almost every faith and political persuasion, decided, unanimously, that Iraq had been, and remained, in breach of its obligations. In particular they drew attention to Iraq's failure to cooperate with United Nations weapons inspectors and to complete the required disarmament actions.

The resolution put Iraq on notice—the consequences of noncompliance would be serious.

If the compelling terms of this last resolution are not enforced, then the Security Council's deeds will have failed to match its rhetoric and serious long-term damage will have been done to the United Nations.

In hindsight the world has been too trusting—not careful enough in its dealings with the Iraqi President. But the situation is different now. Iraq has not changed—but we have. We now understand, after the events in Bali
and those of 11 September 2001, that we are living in a world where unexpected and devastating terrorist attacks on free and open societies can occur in ways that we never before imagined possible.

There is a new dimension to international relations and we cannot ignore it. The atrocity in Bali demonstrated something Australia had never fully understood until then—that we are truly vulnerable. In light of this we have reappraised the way we view and deal with the threat of terrorism. We understand the danger of leaving threats unaddressed.

As the British Prime Minister, Mr Tony Blair—whose leadership on this issue, domestically, in his own country, has been very impressive indeed—said last Saturday there are two grave issues the world must now confront: the problem of weapons of mass destruction and the challenge of international terrorism.

He said that if both were not dealt with they would sooner or later come together with terrifying consequences for the world.

On 8 November, the Security Council decided to—and I will use the words of resolution 1441—'afford Iraq a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations'.

The Security Council has given the Iraqi President one last opportunity to demonstrate his willingness to fulfil the commitments he gave in 1991. The terms of the resolution are explicit and prescriptive. Iraq is required to demonstrate compliance. The onus is not on the inspectors to find prohibited weapons or programs. It is on Iraq to prove it has destroyed its weapons and dismantled its programs.

And how has Iraq responded?

The weapons inspectors have given their first comprehensive report. They have been very critical of Iraq's attitude—in Dr Blix's view Iraq has cooperated on process but not on substance. The studied impudence of Iraq to the rest of the world has again been on display.

Without Iraq's active and sincere cooperation the weapons inspectors are wasting their time. Inspectors can assist Iraq disarm, they can verify to the world community that Iraq is disarming—they cannot, simply by their presence, achieve disarmament.

Dr Blix did not expressly ask for more time. He did, however, ask for more cooperation. Those who argue that the key issue is to give the inspectors more time have missed the point.

The inspectors do not need time. They need Iraq's cooperation. If Iraq were demonstrating full compliance, I would argue they be given all the time in the world. But this is demonstrably not the case.

At the end of last month, Dr Blix reported to the Security Council that all the questions concerning disarmament of Iraq remain outstanding.

The resolution had posed two important tests by which Iraq could demonstrate compliance—the provision of a full and accurate declaration of the regime's weapons of mass destruction and active cooperation with the inspection process.

Dr Blix reported that Iraq has failed both tests.

The point must clearly be understood that, following its defeat in the Gulf War, Iraq admitted to possessing chemical and biological weapons and to developing a nuclear program. In those circumstances the overwhelming imperative is that Iraq demonstrates to the world that it has destroyed those weapons and disbanded those programs. That, in fact, is what this debate is all about.

The world demands to know precisely what happened to Iraq's pre-1998 weapons and material. Iraq claims to have destroyed them—but Dr Blix is right to demand proof.

There are 6,500 chemical bombs—including 550 shells filled with mustard gas; 360 tonnes of bulk chemical warfare agent—including 1.5 tonnes of the deadly nerve agent VX; 3,000 tonnes of precursor chemicals—300 tonnes of which could only be used for the production of VX; and over 30,000 special munitions for the delivery of chemical and biological agents—all unaccounted for.
In 1995, the international community was confronted by Iraq's massive program for developing offensive biological weapons—one of the largest and most advanced in the world.

Despite four years of intensive inquiries and searches, the weapons inspectors did not even know of its existence until Saddam Hussein's son-in-law, Hussein Kamal, defected. Faced with its duplicity Iraq finally admitted to producing aflatoxin, which causes cancers, the paralysing poison botulinum and anthrax bacteria.

It admitted to manufacturing 8,500 litres of anthrax. A single gram is enough for millions of fatal doses. Dr Blix wants proof that the anthrax has been destroyed—and so do we.

Iraq must account for the large quantity of undeclared growth media for biological weapons and for all its Scud B ballistic missiles. It must explain why it has rebuilt equipment and facilities destroyed by previous inspection teams.

It must allow the unfettered, unrestricted reconnaissance flights so relevant data can be collected and analysed. And it must allow the inspectors unsupervised access to relevant members of the Iraqi science community.

Other countries have, in the recent past, volunteered to undertake a disarmament process—South Africa, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Disarmament can involve complex technical checks and processes—but it is still relatively simple provided there is a high-level political commitment to disarm, sound planning and most importantly full cooperation and transparency with weapons inspection teams.

The transparent, openly cooperative behaviour of those three countries in disarming could not present a more vivid contrast with the stubborn, deceitful behaviour of Iraq, which has all the hallmarks of a nation which is clearly hiding something.

The world community is not asking the Iraqi regime to prove the impossible. It is asking for straightforward answers to a series of very serious questions.

Now is not the time to relieve the pressure on Iraq.

And there is only one form of pressure that Saddam Hussein understands—the threat of military force.

We have tried sanctions and containment. Sanctions can be a very powerful instrument of persuasion but have little influence over a dictator who cares nothing for the wellbeing of his people.

The brutal treatment by Saddam Hussein of his own people can be seen through his cruel and cynical manipulation of the oil for food program developed by the United Nations.

For the last 12 years Iraq has been able to trade its oil for humanitarian goods—food and medicines—under United Nations supervision.

Tragically for the Iraqi people, Saddam Hussein has rorted the program, violated its provisions and evaded its constraints. A significant portion of the humanitarian goods is re-exported from Iraq for cash, and oil is routinely smuggled out and sold illegally so that Saddam Hussein can finance his weapons program.

It is the threat of military action which has proved to be the most effective, and perhaps the only, means of attracting President Hussein's attention.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations has recognised the value of this strategy. Kofi Annan has stated publicly that, in his opinion, if the Americans had not applied military pressure through the build-up of forces in the Gulf the weapons inspectors would not now be in Iraq. There can be no stronger statement of the diplomatic value of the military deployment. There could be no more explicit rejection of America's critics.

The Australian government has the same view. Like the Secretary-General, we recognise the value of this strategy and we do not consider that the burden of it should fall to the United States and the United Kingdom alone.

That is one of the reasons why elements of the Australian Defence Force are being pre-positioned in the Persian Gulf.
Mr Speaker, this is not the first time that Australia has pre-positioned forces in the gulf, both to apply diplomatic pressure against Saddam Hussein and in anticipation of possible military action against Iraq.

In 1998, in the lead-up to Operation Desert Fox, the government pre-positioned Special Air Service forces—some 150 of them—and two refuelling aircraft with British and American forces in the gulf. We did so in the absence of any new, specific Security Council authorisation and on the understanding that a final decision to commit to military action had not been taken at the time of deployment. The aim then, as now, was to put pressure on Saddam Hussein. The circumstances of the pre-positioning of forces in 1998 are so similar as to be nearly identical.

In 1998, the then Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Brand—a former defence minister—recognised the value of the strategy, when he said:

... part of the reason why we have supported the Government in giving our approval to the steps that they've taken thus far, has been to assist in putting pressure on Saddam Hussein. And there's no doubt in my mind if there had not been pressure coming in from those who are prepared to be part of a coalition, the energising of the UN Security Council and the energising of a couple of members of the UN Security Council—Russia and France—to try and find solutions, simply wouldn't have occurred.

In deciding to pre-position our troops, we were also responding to advice from the Australian Defence Force that if, at some time in the near future, we wish to participate in military action our troops would be advantaged by having the opportunity to prepare and acclimatise.

Mr Speaker, over the past few months there has been sustained criticism from some quarters, both here and abroad, regarding the role of the United States on this whole issue.

So much of that criticism has been either wrong, unfair or downright prejudiced.

No criticism is more outrageous than the claim that US behaviour is driven by a wish to take control of Iraq's oil reserves. Self-evidently, if cheap oil supplies were America's dominant motive, then years before now the United States would have done a deal with Iraq to lift the sanctions in return for plentiful supplies of low-priced oil.

I have no doubt that the driving force behind American policy towards Iraq now is that, in the wake of the events of 11 September, they have a justifiable concern that the twin evils of weapons of mass destruction, in the hands of rogue states, and international terrorism will come together with horrific consequences.

Mr Latham—They've never done anything wrong!

The SPEAKER—The member for Werriwa is warned!

Mr HOWARD—The United States has also been falsely accused of acting unilaterally and thus in contemptuous disregard for the role of the United Nations.

The issue of Iraq is now before the Security Council precisely because of the actions and pressure of the United States.

For almost four years the Security Council had left Iraq in the too-hard basket. On 12 September 2002, President Bush addressed the General Assembly and reminded the United Nations of its responsibility to deal with Iraq's repeated defiance of Security Council resolutions.

Unless, therefore, it is regarded as provocative and contemptuous of the United States to charge the United Nations with the obligation of enforcing its own decisions, this allegation against the United States is without any substance.

The issue of Iraq will again be before the Security Council tomorrow, 5 February, at the express request of the United States. And its Secretary of State, Colin Powell, will present some new material to council members.

I have authorised the use of some Australian-sourced material in that presentation, which will include material from a number of countries. So as to protect sources, it is not possible for me to be specific as to what material has been sourced in Australia. I am sure that the House will understand this.

It can barely be denied by anyone that all the actions of the United States, at present, are designed to ensure that the Security Council acts to compel compliance with its own unanimously adopted resolution 1441.
Australia is a close ally of the United States. No nation is more important to our long-term security. Australians will never forget the vital assistance given to us by the United States during World War II.

Our value systems while far from identical are nonetheless similar. We share common democratic values. We have made common cause in the fight against terrorism.

Australia and the United States have a common interest in preventing the spread of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

Australia's alliance with the United States has been and will remain an important element in the government's decision making process on the Iraqi issue.

The crucial long-term value of the United States alliance should always be a factor in major national security decisions taken by Australia.

In an increasingly globalised and borderless world, the relationship between Australia and the United States will become more and not less important.

The most intense desire of us all is that this challenging issue is resolved without war. No-one wants war. We all hope it can be avoided.

Given the past intransigent attitude of Iraq, it is very difficult to conceive that even the full weight of Security Council opinion, unanimously expressed and threatening imminent military action, will induce Saddam Hussein to comply with his international obligations.

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

The greater the hesitancy, the greater the blurring at the edges, the more likely it is that Iraq will again dismiss world opinion.

These are some of the views I will put next week in my discussions with President Bush, the British Prime Minister, Mr Blair, the Secretary-General of the United Nations and others.

I will make it clear that, if military action does become necessary, Australia's strong preference is that it takes place pursuant to a new Security Council resolution.

This is not because Australia believes, as a matter of international law, that a new resolution is required.

It is because the passage of a new resolution, authorising the use of force, will bring forth the greatest level of international support for, and involvement in, military action against Iraq.

There is a very strong argument that the terms of 1441, when coupled with all the previous resolutions passed by the Security Council about Iraq, provide a sufficient legal basis for military action, without the express need for a further resolution.

In fact in 1998, if I can return to that again, the government agreed to the deployment I canvassed earlier—with the support of the then opposition, under a different leader—in the clear knowledge that those personnel deployed could be involved in action against Iraq, believing that adequate legal authority existed for that deployment and any subsequent military action under then existing resolutions of the Security Council.

I have said frequently that the outcome from the Security Council may not be a black or white one.

The sense of the Security Council could be that it acquiesces in, or acknowledges the need for, military action without giving it direct sanction.

It is possible that the majority of the council members could vote for military action but the resolution could subsequently be vetoed by a permanent member.

That proposition clearly was in the mind of the Leader of the Opposition, when on 15 January he said:

We won't support any military action outside the authority of the UN... The exception to this position might occur in the case of overwhelming UN Security Council support for military action, but where support for such action was subject to veto... In other words, we might need to assess such a situation in light of the circumstances of the veto.
If the Security Council produces a grey rather than a black or white outcome, choices on final action and commitments will need to be made by many nations, including Australia.

In reaching its final decision the Australian government will be influenced not only by our powerful desire to stop the spread of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and our alliance with the United States, but also importantly by the past practice of nations which have taken collective military action in the interests of world or regional security.

For example, the NATO countries conducted bombing attacks against Serbia in 1999 without any kind of direct Security Council authorisation. That authority was never sought because of an apprehended Russian veto.

A subsequent joint Sino-Russian motion condemning the NATO action was defeated. There the matter rested. The Security Council was taken to have acquiesced in the NATO action.

Our goal is disarmament. We want to see a renewed commitment to the principle of nonproliferation. We want to see Iraq free of weapons of mass destruction. We want to see the sanctions lifted. We want Iraq back in the community of nations—because it would be good for the world, good for Australia and, most particularly, good for the people of Iraq. Most of all we want the conflict resolved without resort to military force.

If the international community does not act now to disarm Iraq, it will have made a mockery of years of effort to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction. It will have encouraged others to mimic Iraq. It will make dealing with North Korea almost impossible. And, most importantly, failure to act will gravely compromise the authority of the United Nations.

Clearly the pre-positioning of Australian forces and the contingency planning with the United States military—to which ministers and I have referred frequently over recent months—have put Australia in a position where it can effectively, and in circumstances providing the best assurances of safety for our forces, contribute to a military operation against Iraq, should a final decision be taken for this to occur.

The moment for that final decision has yet to arrive. That decision ultimately will be guided by the judgment which the government makes as to where Australia's national interest lies.

This issue poses great and difficult choices for Australia. We all hate the very thought of war in any form. Our natural instinct is to recoil from it. The temptation to turn our backs on the problem and hope it will go away is great.

Yet the realities of the world in which we now live do not permit us that luxury.

We all know that history is replete with examples of the community of nations retreating from difficult decisions through fear of the immediate consequences only to find that those difficult decisions must ultimately be addressed and at an infinitely greater cost.

Finally, our thoughts must turn to the men and women of the Australian Defence Force on deployment doing their duty and maintaining a long tradition of courage and professionalism in the service of Australia.

Whatever may be their role in the weeks and months ahead, we admire them, we support them and we wish them well. We are united in our prayers and our hopes for their safety and their wellbeing.

I present a copy of the statement.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (3.43 p.m.)—I move:

That the House take note of the paper.

Question agreed to.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the House) (3.43 p.m.)—by leave—I move:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as would prevent Mr Crean (Leader of the Opposition) speaking for a period not exceeding 53 minutes.

Question agreed to.