Iraq

SPEECH

Wednesday, 5 February 2003
Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (5.53 pm)—Today I want to record my position in this important debate on Iraq so that the people of Dickson can understand why I strongly support the position taken by the Prime Minister and this government. I start by taking the opportunity to thank those people from the Dickson electorate who have contacted me—to date, a total of 46—and the people from the electorate at a number of events I have attended since this debate commenced who have expressed to me either their support or opposition.

In today's uncertain times one of the greatest fears held by counter-terrorist and law enforcement agencies around the world is the thought of terrorists obtaining weapons of mass destruction. I am sure that, following the atrocities committed by terrorists in New York and Washington only 18 months ago and again in Bali last October, all Australians share that view. The thought that only one gram of anthrax is enough to make millions of fatal doses, together with the thought that Iraq has previously admitted to manufacturing 8,500 litres of anthrax, now unaccounted for, should send a shiver down the spine of any rational, thinking person.

I was elected to this parliament to represent the interests of the people of Dickson and to work hard to make safer and happier not only their lives now but the lives of their children and those of many generations into the future. If only for this reason, I strongly support the decision of the government to deal now with a dictator who has the potential to risk world peace on a scale quite unimaginable.

As we now understand, terrorists hate our way of life: the fact that our children can walk to school freely and that we can enjoy the company of our friends at a barbecue or at a restaurant. Most of all, what terrorists, and indeed dictators like Saddam Hussein, hate is our democracy. Saddam Hussein is a murderer. He has murdered hundreds of thousands of his own people and those from surrounding countries. He has used chemical weapons on people from his own country.

Australia has chosen to forward deploy elements of the Australian defence forces as part of its moral obligation to ensure where possible ongoing stability around the world. It is now clear that Saddam Hussein, after having 12 years to comply with the world's request that Iraq disarm itself of weapons of mass destruction, has failed to do so and in fact never had any intention of doing so.

At the outset, let me make it very clear that my view, and I am sure the view of my constituents, is that we do not want war. We do not seek war and we are opposed to war. That is the position of this government. However, we must as a nation be realistic about the threat posed, and the Australian people would demand that we deal with this threat in a way that serves our national interest. We all remain hopeful that the military pressure being applied currently to Saddam's regime will convince Iraq to comply with pending UN resolution 1441. As Greg Sheridan correctly wrote in the Australian on 30 January this year, if you want to avoid war the only way is to convince Hussein to disarm and to do so publicly. That is why this government strongly believes the UN process should be given every opportunity to work. That is why our forward deployments have been made and that is why the Prime Minister will engage world leaders in talks next week.

Many people say we only want to follow the US lead. That is a nonsense. But it is not good enough that after 12 years the same levels of doubt over Iraq's intentions still exist. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has acknowledged that the reintroduction of weapons inspectors would not have been possible if it were not for the US military pressure applied to Iraq. Like the United States, our intention in joining a military build-up at this time is to force Hussein into a peaceful outcome.

The Labor Party and some media commentators are intent on beating the drum of an anti-US sentiment, which is a cop-out and a weak way of dealing with this issue. Many have commented incorrectly that the US has taken an active interest in Iraq for oil purposes. This is a ludicrous proposition. If that was indeed the key motive of the United States, sanctions on Iraq's trading of oil would have been lifted years ago, guaranteeing a cheap supply of oil to the West.
It should also not be forgotten that there are innocent countries in the region surrounding Iraq which have been made to live in constant fear that he will begin the day by pushing the button of war. It must never be forgotten that Saddam Hussein ordered his troops into Kuwait in 1991 without a moment’s hesitation and had little remorse for the damage done to that small nation and its people. What must now be fully realised by all Australians is that the onus is firmly on Saddam Hussein for full disclosure and disarmament through cooperation with the UN weapons inspectors and indeed the world community.

Some in this debate have even suggested that there is no evidence Iraq has weapons of mass destruction—an absurd proposition, particularly when you read the report of Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector, in which he said:

The nerve agent VX is one of the most toxic ever developed. Iraq has declared that it only produced VX on a pilot scale, just a few tonnes and that the quality was poor and the product unstable. Consequently, it was said that the agent was never weaponised. Iraq said that the small quantity of agent remaining after the Gulf War was unilaterally destroyed in the summer of 1991.

However, Dr Blix goes on to say:

UNMOVIC, however, has information that conflicts with this account. There are indications that Iraq had worked on the problem of purity and stabilization and that more had been achieved than has been declared. ... There are also indications that the agent was weaponised.

Also appearing in recent media reports—as recently as 2 February in the Brisbane Sunday Mail—is a report in relation to the defection of a bodyguard of Saddam Hussein. It says:

Saddam Hussein’s senior bodyguard has fled from Iraq with details of the dictator’s secret arsenal and hideouts. Abu Hamdi Mahmoud has provided a list of sites that so far the UN inspectors have not visited. They include: an underground chemical weapon facility in the capital, Baghdad; a SCUD assembly area 150 kilometres to the west near Ahmadi—the missiles come from North Korea; two underground bunkers in the western desert that contain biological weapons.

How can there be any doubt as to the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq? But the onus has never been on United Nations weapons inspectors to prove Hussein has weapons of mass destruction. They are not detectives. The onus has always been on Iraq to demonstrate what has happened with the weapons acknowledged only five years ago.

At the end of 1998, inspectors were unable to account for about 360 tonnes of bulk chemical warfare agent; 1½ tonnes of VX nerve agent; up to 3,000 tonnes of precursor chemicals, including approximately 300 tonnes which were unique to the production of VX; growth media for biological agents, enough to produce over three times the 8,500 litres of anthrax spores that Iraq admits to having manufactured; and over 30,000 special munitions for the delivery of chemical and biological agents. At that time in 1998, inspectors were also unable to verify the purported destruction of Scud missiles filled with chemical and biological agents. Iraq has had a great deal of time to relocate and conceal these weapons of mass destruction—certainly prior to the UN weapons inspectors re-entering the country. If you were Hussein and you had destroyed these weapons, would you not just produce the evidence and satisfy the weapons inspectors? Surely there is a video or documentary evidence. If Iraq will not fully disclose the whereabouts of these weapons, the world community must take an interest. That is why the US, Britain and Australia have, and will continue to have, a presence in the region.

What is also very interesting in this debate, and again is being overlooked by those opposite, is what the former ALP leader, Mr Beazley, said in 1998 in support of the forward deployment of 150 special forces soldiers and two 707 midair refuellers. On that occasion the Labor Party supported a deployment made in very similar circumstances. Why have the Labor Party now decided that they should not support this forward deployment? It is even more imperative than it was in 1998, when Mr Beazley said:

... part of the reason why we have supported the government in giving our approval to the steps that they have taken thus far has been in putting pressure on Saddam Hussein, and there is no doubt in my mind if there had not been pressure coming 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 would not have occurred.

Equally important to the actual deployment is the ongoing close relationship that Australia enjoys with the United States. The 51-year-old ANZUS military alliance that our country and New Zealand have with the US is paramount to our nation’s security and a key part of our nations’ close ties. It is important that all Australians understand that, just because our country has a close relationship and understanding with the US, we are not
bound to participate in conflict, nor has this government committed our troops to any conflict. As the Prime Minister said to the House yesterday, conflict is the last option. The Australian soldiers who will be participating in that build-up will leave behind families—wives, husbands, children, parents—and friends, and it is important that these people are afforded all that can be done for them whilst their loved ones serve our country overseas defending the rights of everyone to live in peace without the worry that comes with evil states which possess weapons of mass destruction. Those families should know that this government is 110 per cent behind them, and we will ensure that they are looked after to the best of our ability.

The forward deployment of Australian troops and machinery also allows those who will potentially be in the front line putting their own lives at risk to be properly acclimatised and prepared for the region's conditions should they be asked to participate in such conflict. The ADF is correct in requesting this measure from the government, because it is in the interests of our soldiers.

In summary, the stance taken by this government on Iraq demonstrates a clear desire for the UN to properly fulfil its responsibilities of to ensure a peaceful outcome through continued pressure and persistence. But the process cannot go on for another 12 years. We do want another resolution from the UN—a resolution of action. The UN is afforded no choice but to offer that resolution now. If Iraq makes the choice to not accept the opportunity it is now presented with, it will be up to the responsible countries of the world to ensure Hussein is disarmed fully and effectively. The soldiers and families of the ADF have this government's full support, but hopefully their presence in the region will help to ensure that they are not required to participate in any conflict. The ball is now firmly in Hussein's court; what he does with it is his choice. If he chooses to further ignore the pressure being applied on his country, then he faces the wrath of those who will not tolerate Iraq having the ability to hold the free world to ransom with unimaginably evil weapons of mass destruction. Our soldiers are being called on to protect our nation, our people and our way of life, and we know that they will meet that challenge.