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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Iraq

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Bishop, Julie, MP

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Ms JULIE BISHOP (Curtin) (6.18 pm)—I, for one, detest Saddam Hussein and his record of aggression and brutal human rights abuses. In debating the Prime Minister's statement on Iraq, let us take a moment to look at the record of this regime. It is a regime whose most hated enemy, and most wounded opponent, is its own population. Anyone who has seen the grainy footage of Saddam Hussein's appearance before his own Revolutionary Command Council in 1979—as he called out of the audience members of his own government for summary execution—will recall with nauseated horror the sobbing, the cries and the sight of grown men terrorised.

This is a regime that employs torture as an instrument of public policy. It employs electrocution, beatings, starvation, mutilation and rape—euphemised as 'violation of women's honour'. It is a regime that found it opportune to invade Iran in September 1980, generating over one million casualties, and it has deployed chemical weapons on a scale not seen since the Great War. It is a regime that undertook the Anfal campaign against Kurdish Iraqis in 1988, which saw 100,000 civilians murdered or 'disappeared'. It is a regime that saw fit to launch a war against Kuwait just two years after the Iran-Iraq cease-fire. It is a regime that attempted to instigate a regional conflagration by its missile bombardment of Israel—a noncombatant nation—in 1991.

It is well to remember the history that has brought us to this point. Iraq's unprovoked attack of Kuwait brought near universal international condemnation. The UN called for a full withdrawal by Iraq. Iraq, in defiance of the UN, refused. A multinational force, led by the United States and Great Britain, invaded Iraq and expelled Iraq from Kuwait in Operation Desert Storm. As part of the cease-fire Saddam agreed that Iraq would, in cooperation with the United Nations, identify and then destroy all its weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, biological and chemical. This obligation was embodied in United Nations Security Council resolution 687 of 1991.

As history has shown, Iraq has continuously and consistently defied resolution 687 and subsequent resolutions—16 in all—calling upon Iraq to disarm itself of its weapons of mass destruction, and it has continued to fail to cooperate with United Nations weapons inspectors. Most significantly, resolution 1441 was passed by a unanimous vote of the 15-member Security Council last November. It recognised that Iraq has been and remains in material breach of its obligations under relevant resolutions, including resolution 687. The Security Council gave Iraq one final opportunity to comply. We all know the content of the report of Dr Blix on the weapons inspections. Iraq has not complied. Our Prime Minister has now called upon the Security Council to pass a further resolution.

I give this potted history of Saddam's appalling record of international thuggery because this is the man, this is the regime, whose survival now depends on the willingness of self-declared progressives to excuse, deny, prevaricate and pontificate. Like all members of this House I abhor war, but I am not a pacifist. I do believe that in extraordinary circumstances the exercise of military force can prove to be the least awful necessity to bring about a better world—for example, the removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The present circumstances, a world defined by the massacres of 11 September 2001 and 12 October 2002, remind me of the words of George Orwell in 1942:

Pacifism is objectively pro-fascist. This is elementary common sense. If you hamper the war effort of one side you automatically help out that of the other. Nor is there any real way of remaining outside such a war as the present one. In practice, 'he that is not with me is against me.'

That was 1942. In the case today of a rogue state with a record of that of Iraq, talk of pacifism should not be accommodated. Given the increasing demonstration of international will to disarm Iraq, the course of coercive diplomacy assiduously followed by the United States, the strategy of military build-up to disarm Iraq and the options available to the international community, I believe our government has adopted the correct course of action as set out in the Prime Minister's statement to the House yesterday.

Can the genuine concerns held by many members of the community be addressed? I accept that they are genuine concerns and queries. I have received many representations from constituents of Curtin who are

concerned about the possibility of Australian participation in military action against Iraq. I have made these concerns known to the government and I think it is appropriate today, in the limited time available, to address one or two particular themes implicit in those concerns. As for others, I hope I have addressed them in communications directly with the electorate. There is questioning as to why Saddam is a priority—why his brutality and belligerence are any worse than that of many other dictators and 'thugocrats' around the globe.

As someone who has seen first hand the shocking, brutal facts of life in Mugabe's Zimbabwe—the betrayal of democracy, the electoral fraud, the torture and murder, the use of starvation as a political weapon and the land theft—I can attest that the Mugabe regime is appalling. Mugabe is a thug; so is Castro and Mugabe's mate, Gaddafi. I could list many regimes that ought to be consigned to the dust heap of history. Of late, none has received the same attention as Iraq. None is likely to be liberated by multinational military action any time soon. Yet it would be grossly perverse to ignore Iraq's defiance of its international obligations or to deny the alleviation of Iraqi repression and misery on the basis that the West is not an equal opportunity liberator.

The fact is that the opportunity has been afforded to the international community to make restitution for its failure to enforce its will, as embodied in the numerous United Nations resolutions against Iraq. If it is hypocrisy to call now for the disarmament by force of a tyrant once tolerated and a regime reprieved, then it is hypocrisy in the service of the greater good.

Other constituents have raised with me their concerns about the role to be played by the United Nations and that played by the United States, yet the diplomatic progress that has been made since mid-2002, including Security Council resolution 1441, has come about only through the application of military pressure by the United States and its allies. The United States has done what the world has asked it to do and has acted within the framework of the United Nations. The onus remains on Iraq—not on the United Nations, the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia. Only Saddam Hussein can guarantee the peaceful resolution of this issue.

Margaret Thatcher once observed that, 'Hope is no basis for a defence policy.' Nor is it a sound basis for foreign policy. Some of my constituents have made the honest, if self-serving, observation that Iraq is a world away from Australia. Regardless of the rightness of any proposed mission, could we not simply sit this one out and let it slide under the radar? Does a ballistic missile capability reaching Cyprus, Turkey, Israel or the Gulf States present an immediate threat to the citizens of Perth?

Iraq is, along with North Korea, one of only two nations in the world to breach the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. It is clear that the possession of weapons of mass destruction or the continuing ability to amass those weapons by Saddam Hussein's regime present a current danger to the people of Iraq—on whom he has previously used those weapons—other nations in the region and Australia's interests. I agree with the reasoning that weapons of mass destruction in the hands of an acknowledged supporter of terrorism such as Saddam pose a threat to international security. The potential distribution of such weapons to terrorists is a genuine threat to the safety of Australians, given the experiences of the past 17 months. The critics are, in a sense, right: September 11, Bali—they did change everything. They did change attitudes. Never again will we discount the murderous ambition of jihadist terrorists. Who doubts now that, were the options open to such fanatics, they would not use biological, chemical or even nuclear weapons against the West at the first opportunity?

There is a United Nations mechanism already in place for action to be taken against this serial offender, Iraq. Nonetheless, it would be ideal for the Security Council to pass a second resolution in this regard. It remains the Australian government's position that the United Nations risks losing its credibility, and its capacity to hold future rogue states to account, if it fails to act on the breaches by Iraq and if it declines to disarm Saddam. I have faith that the United Nations will act in the forcible disarming of Iraq; otherwise it would be leaving its unfinished business to a coalition of democratic states probably including the United States, the United Kingdom, a number of European nations and Australia. While such action could be justified under the present resolution 1441, just as NATO was justified in militarily intervening in the Kosovo conflict and in attacking Serbia—action that was not sanctioned by the UN and could never have been so sanctioned, given the Security Council veto exercised by Serbia's ally, Russia—the international community looks to the United Nations to take responsibility for disarming this international threat. I commend and support the Prime Minister's statement to the House.