Mr DOWNER (Mayo—Minister for Foreign Affairs) (3.43 pm)—First, let me respond on behalf of the government to this motion—which the Leader of the Opposition, having moved, is now not going to participate in any longer. Let me make this point first of all: a number of the allegations that are being made by the Leader of the Opposition are quite untrue. They are utterly false. Secondly, the Leader of the Opposition has moved his position very substantially as time has gone on. Ever since the Cole commission began its hearings, we have heard from the opposition hysteria, the likes of which I do not think I have heard before in this parliament—some of the most disgracefully dishonest allegations made against this government that I have heard in 10 years. Last week, and the week before, the opposition was saying that ministers in this government and the Prime Minister were corrupt. That is a very serious allegation. The Leader of the Opposition stood up at the Press Club and on other occasions—on 2UE, I think it was. Even Mike Carlton, who is a Labor cheerleader on the radio, questioned this allegation by the Leader of the Opposition that ministers and the Prime Minister were corrupt—in other words, that somehow we were receiving money or deliberately supporting a breach of sanctions by an Australian company in order to assist Saddam Hussein.

The trouble with using that kind of completely dishonest hyperbole—in fact, it is utterly defamatory to suggest that ministers and the Prime Minister are corrupt—is that it simply undermines the credibility of the Leader of the Opposition’s case. That is why the general community in Australia does not believe the Leader of the Opposition. The proposition that the opposition is trying to convince the public to believe is that somehow we were supporters of Saddam Hussein and wanted to get rid of him at the same time. It is perfectly obvious that that is a nonsense. With the greatest of respect, I think the opposition has a bit of a cheek in the position it is taking on this issue, because the opposition passionately opposed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein: it was an outrage that the Australian government supported the British and American governments to join the coalition of the willing and get rid of Saddam Hussein.

Mrs Irwin—Coalition of the killing!

Mr DOWNER—How graceful the member for Fowler is. She calls it the ‘coalition of the killing’—in other words, part of the opposition’s general approach that it was a simple outrage to get rid of Saddam Hussein. The opposition argues that the sanctions regime should have remained in place, that the oil for food program should still be in place today and that if there were rorts in the oil for food program that was just too bad. But of course the opposition knows that if it had not been for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein then no-one would have found out about the rorts of the oil for food program; they would not have found out about the nature of the corruption. It is because Volcker was able to get to the documents of the Iraqi regime that it was possible to find out about the background to this systemic corruption in Iraq. If Saddam Hussein were still there—which is the opposition’s policy—the rorting would continue, and that apparently would not be of any concern to the opposition.

During the life of the sanctions regime, this government—as was true of the previous government—always had a policy of supporting the sanctions regime. When the oil for food resolution was passed, the Australian government supported it in the context of sanctions on Iraq. Throughout the life of the sanctions regime on Iraq, there was never an instruction from any minister or from any Prime Minister of this country to waive that regime in relation to Australian companies nor any instruction to Australian public servants to go slow or soft on enforcing the rules—and there has not been a skerrick of evidence to suggest that. Indeed, there has not been a skerrick of evidence that anybody in this government, be it the Prime Minister, ministers or public servants, was in some way corrupt, as the Leader of the Opposition claims, in addressing this issue. So the allegations made by the opposition are extremely dishonest. At the end of the day, hysterical claims of corruption, like the one from the Leader of the Opposition’s speech a moment ago, undermine the credibility of the opposition. You do not win an argument through hysteria, and maximising hysteria is not going to get you anywhere.

In his speech, the Leader of the Opposition suggested that the Australian government was responsible for the death and injury of American soldiers in Iraq. I think that allegation stands on its own. It is a disgraceful and
disgusting slur. Let me put it this way: if we made an allegation like that against the Labor Party there would be uproar and outrage. But the Labor Party, having supported the retention of Saddam Hussein’s regime, now suggests that the Australian government was quite happy to fund the death and maiming of American soldiers and of course support Palestinian suicide bombers.

No country, no government, has been more supportive than the Australian government of what the Americans have been doing in Iraq. The American government is probably the only government that has been as supportive of Israel as this government has been. We have been enormously supportive of Israel. The ‘reasonable person in the street test’ here is quite a simple one, and that is of course that they know the Australian government does not support the killing of American soldiers or support suicide bombers. Saddam Hussein is not financing suicide bombers anymore and has not been able to since March 2003. But if we had not got rid of Saddam Hussein, he still could. He cannot do it from a prison in Baghdad, but he could do it from one of his presidential palaces when he was President of Iraq. We got rid of him. Whatever vile allegations are made against the government—and the allegations made by the Leader of the Opposition and the member for Griffith—

Mr Rudd interjecting—

The SPEAKER—Order! The member for Griffith will have his turn.

Mr DOWNER—have to be at pretty much the lowest level of allegation I have heard in my 21 years in parliament. I do not think the Labor Party have ever sunk quite as low as they have sunk on this issue. What has the government done? When we were given information, we have acted on it. In particular—

Ms Gillard—Oh—

Mr DOWNER—The opposition’s premise is that somehow we supported Saddam Hussein and we supported corruption—that in fact we were corrupt and we were supporting Palestinian suicide bombers and supporting the killing of American soldiers. That does not stand up to even a test of commonsense, let alone a test of common decency.

When the Volcker commission was set up, the Prime Minister, the trade minister and I—the three figures the subject of this censure motion—all insisted that not just our government departments, the Australian government, but also the AWB should fully cooperate with the Volcker inquiry. Our point is that we actually wanted to get to the heart of this issue, not escape from the heart of it. We do not want to cover anything up—quite the contrary. We were fully supportive of Volcker. If we wanted to cover things up we would not have been supportive of Volcker. We would not have made our officials available to Volcker. We would not have made documents available to Volcker. If we had not been fully supportive of disclosure on this issue, we would not have set up a judicial commission with, in effect, the powers of a royal commission.

The fact is that, as we have got information, we have followed up that information, culminating with a judicial commission which now has access not only to all of the relevant DFAT documents but also to the documentation of the AWB. That is something that the Cole commission has. That is something that we certainly did not have. That is something that Volcker, we hope, had, but we are not so sure, on the basis of some of the evidence that is coming forward in the commission.

I would have thought that this was a pretty simple case of the government repeatedly doing the right thing—a government that opposed Saddam Hussein and wanted him out of office, and that helped to get him out; a government that contributed to freeing the people of Iraq, who have turned out to vote in their millions; a government that has always opposed corruption in all of its manifestations; and a government which, on this issue, has acted not only with probity but with complete integrity.

Measure that against an opposition that accuses the government of corruption, which is a criminal offence. That is what the Leader of the Opposition has accused the government of—accusing the government of supporting the funding for the killing of American soldiers and the killing of Israelis through Palestinian suicide bombers. The opposition might wonder why it is not going very well. You have your cheer squad out there, but the reason the opposition is not going very well is that your arguments are not credible. This is a government which has full integrity on the issue of Iraq.

Let me conclude with one point. This was very interesting. Last night, the Leader of the Opposition went on the Lateline program. The House might recall that one of the previous arguments used against this government
is that it lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Go on. Up you go. All roar. Yes, yes. That is what you said. There were questions here. We had resolutions. The Leader of the Opposition was thumping the table—‘the most disgraceful thing in the whole of the history of the world’, ‘this government has brought shame upon Australia’. This was because we got rid of Saddam Hussein.

But then, of course, the arguments changed. I noticed that last night on the Lateline program the opposition, having argued that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction, said that actually Australian money—it was not Australian money, of course; as the Prime Minister explained; it was Iraqi money—

Mr Rudd interjecting—

Mr DOWNER—The truth is important actually. You are always preaching about the truth. You are one of the most dishonest politicians who has ever been elected to this parliament, if not the most dishonest. But let me make this point: last night—

The SPEAKER—Order! The minister will withdraw that.

Mr DOWNER—I withdraw. The Leader of the Opposition said that this money may have been used for the procurement of research on weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein. When it suited, we were lying about weapons of mass destruction; last night on Lateline we were funding research into weapons of mass destruction! But still we should have kept Saddam Hussein in power! While we were funding his research into weapons of mass destruction, he was killing people in Israel by funding suicide bombers! All these terrible things were happening, but we should have kept him in power!

With the greatest of respect to the House, Mr Speaker, I do not think the opposition has a scintilla of credibility on this issue. We very much look forward to Mr Justice Cole completing his report. He will produce his report and we can all sit down and have a look at it. Mr Justice Cole is not a political player. He is not trying to make some childlike party political point to boost his support in the caucus room of the Labor Party or, as in the case of the member for Griffith, trying to undermine the Leader of the Opposition and become the Leader of the Opposition himself, which is obviously what part of the game is here. No, Mr Justice Cole is not playing that game. He is cautiously and thoughtfully looking through the documents. He is going to interview people from my department. I am very happy for them to go forward and talk to him, to give the details in a dispassionate way.

This campaign by the opposition is out there. It is pretty much the most dishonest and disgraceful I have seen in 21 years in parliament. The opposition should hang its head in shame.