



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Iraq

SPEECH

Wednesday, 5 February 2003

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Date Wednesday, 5 February 2003
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Questioner
Speaker Ridgeway, Sen Aden

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator RIDGEWAY (New South Wales) (11.22 am)—I also rise to respond to the Prime Minister's statement on Iraq and I join my colleagues in the Democrats in stating my full opposition to military action against Iraq. Like my colleagues, I also support the amendment to the motion that was tabled yesterday by the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Senator Faulkner, and I welcome the ALP's support for the Democrats' amendment to that motion as I believe the members of the United Nations Security Council should be made aware of the position of the Australian Senate. There is one element of the Prime Minister's statement that I do agree with, but for reasons very different to those that he outlined. The burden of resolving the current crisis with Iraq is not a responsibility that should be left to the USA, the UK and Australia alone. It is, in my view, a responsibility for the entire international community to resolve through diplomacy and peaceful means. The clear message of the ministerial statement though is that the forward deployment of Australian troops is designed to put enough pressure on Saddam Hussein so that he will be forced to fully comply with UN resolution 1441 and disarm Iraq of all weapons of mass destruction. In other words, the government would have Australians believe that sending some 2,000 Australian troops to the Gulf to join US and British forces is the only way that anyone will be able to achieve the active cooperation of the Iraqi government, including the elimination of its stockpile of weapons of mass destruction and the cessation of its programs that produce these weapons.

The disarmament of Iraq is an outcome that I believe everyone in this chamber would dearly like to see. However, the question on the minds of many Australians is why our defence forces are being sent to the Gulf to apply pressure when the international community—and indeed the Australian community—is not supportive of this unilateral act by any nation. The accusation that Saddam Hussein has treated the UN resolutions with contempt does not justify another nation treating the United Nations and the agreed procedures of the international community with equal contempt. Yet that is precisely what the Australian government has done, and it is also trying to convince us all that two wrongs do make a right. Rather than adhering to the principles of international diplomacy, the government is prepared to compromise the standing and authority of the very body that the international community established, in the wake of the last world war, to maintain international peace and security. The Howard government is prepared, of course, to turn this international crisis into a crude test of the power of the United Nations. Yet the UN Security Council is the one international institution capable of resolving the Iraqi situation without the need for more bloodshed and additional suffering for the Iraqi people.

I think the Australian government should do everything possible to utilise the extraordinary capabilities of this institution, particularly to build a stronger human rights culture at the international level. The international community has made it quite clear that it is far from having exhausted all diplomatic avenues for resolution of the situation with Iraq. Indeed, some of the permanent members of the UN Security Council remain resolutely opposed to any unilateral action against Iraq and have made it clear that they are prepared to exercise their veto power to prevent such actions. At the present time I believe that the Prime Minister should heed the wise words of Nelson Mandela, who observed:

If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner.

Instead our Prime Minister and the President of the United States are playing on our fears in an attempt to garner public support for their pre-emptive and provocative actions. We have nothing to fear from the Iraqi people themselves. It is their leader who is purportedly playing brinkmanship with the international community, and arguably Australia and the United States are playing right into his hands. US presidential historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr has pointed out that basing a declaration of war on fear, instead of on overt acts of belligerency, is not only illegal under international law and convention but also immoral. It cannot be right to kill a country's civilians because you are afraid of what their ruler might do, yet this is precisely what the Prime Minister is asking Australians to sanction. Why else would the government spend \$15 million on its antiterrorism mail-out? It is about blatant scaremongering at its worst.

I also believe there are a number of reasons why so many members of the Australian community do not want to see their defence forces engage in another war against Iraq. In addition to the reasons that I have outlined, many

Australians are also deeply concerned about the danger that Australian Defence Force personnel will be exposed to and ask whether this danger can be avoided by exhausting all other diplomatic avenues. As other senators have mentioned here today and yesterday, the Prime Minister is prepared to send some 2,000 Australian Defence Force personnel to the Gulf for involvement in a possible armed conflict, the biggest contingent since our involvement in the Vietnam War. Australians are also concerned about the financial cost of engaging in foreign conflict on the other side of the world—not in our region and certainly not on our shores—when countries in our region are also in crisis and in urgent need of support and assistance from Australia. East Timor, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu have had serious breakdowns in their ability to maintain law and order. What are we going to do to assist in those cases? It is not surprising then that the message being put out in the media, particularly in yesterday's and today's *Australian Financial Review*, is that the government is saying that, whether it be in health, education or indeed tourism, we will inevitably have to compromise on our expenditure in these areas in order to take up war.

I think many Australians are rightly questioning whether our involvement in the Gulf at this time really is in the national interest because there are clearly a lot of other courses of action that are more immediately related to our national interest. Similarly, many Australians are questioning the morality of Australians participating in a war that will dramatically add to the suffering of the Iraqi people. Lost amidst the cries for war is the recognition of the shared responsibility of states and citizens alike to guarantee the human rights of all people, including the 24 million people of Iraq. These people have already suffered throughout the Gulf War and the following 13 years of crippling sanctions that the international community applied.

Whilst the Prime Minister referred in his statement to the fact that Saddam Hussein has 'rorted' the food for oil deal by 'violating its provisions and evading its constraints', there is incontrovertible evidence of the devastating effects that this deal and the associated sanctions have had and continue to have on the lives of ordinary Iraqis. In 1999 a UN humanitarian panel reported that under sanctions Iraq has 'experienced a shift from relative affluence to massive poverty'. In that same year, a UNICEF survey estimated that over 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a consequence of the sanctions between 1991 and 1998 alone. Yet the international community has looked on with indifference and inaction to the appalling humanitarian cost of its own sanctions in Iraq, in the misguided belief that applying pressure to a civilian population would somehow ultimately affect and remove the leadership.

A confidential UN assessment warns of 'disease in epidemic if not pandemic proportions'. Once Iraq's electrical grid system is destroyed, the consequent disruption to the sanitation and public health systems will cause a spike in water-borne disease and child mortality. It goes on to say that there would be 500,000 direct or indirect casualties—assuming that only a conventional war and not a nuclear war is launched—and up to two million internally displaced persons and refugees. UNICEF has warned that in the event of a war against Iraq and the collapse of the monthly food distribution program that already operates across the country the international community can expect a 'nightmare scenario'.

All the concerns that I have referred to have been raised in recent weeks by members of the Australian community, former prime ministers, leaders of the RSL, representatives of the churches, and other ordinary Australians. Yet the Prime Minister in his statement has failed to address the humanitarian concerns or to even acknowledge the moral and ethical questions that an attack on Iraq would inevitably entail.

I close by referring to comments by Martin Luther King in the hope that the Prime Minister will heed them. The wise words of Martin Luther King are:

If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

An action in this situation does not have to mean war. I seek leave to incorporate the remainder of my speech.

Leave granted.

The speech read as follows—

One matter that I do want to correct in the Ministerial Statement relates to the comparison the Prime Minister has made between the current crisis with Iraq and the situation leading up to Operation Desert Fox in 1998.

On page 25 of the statement, the Prime Minister says that these two international incidents are "so similar as to be nearly identical".

This is simply not the case.

It is not appropriate to compare the current situation with Iraq with the situation that existed in the lead up to Operation Desert Fox in 1998— when Australia pre-positioned an SAS squadron and two refuelling aircraft in the Gulf, and joined with British and American forces in the Gulf.

At that time, the Government also held a debate regarding Iraq and its weapons of mass destruction, after Prime Minister Howard had already given the US President an in principle commitment to send Australian defence personnel to the Gulf as part of the US-led international military coalition.

But in contrast to the present situation, the Opposition supported the involvement of ADF personnel in the US-led coalition.

In further contrast, back in 1998, Australia was only proposing dispatching 190 ADF personnel: one SAS squadron and 2 air-to-air refuelling aircraft—NOT 2,000 ADF personnel.

And perhaps in greatest contrast to the present situation, the majority of Australians improved of Australia sending SAS troops to the Gulf if the US were to launch an attack against Iraq (according to a Morgan Poll taken in February 1998).

There simply was not the same level of anxiety and concern in the Australian community that the ADF personnel would be involved in an actual war. Nor did the US Government at the time flag the possibility of a conflict that could involve the deployment of nuclear weapons against the Iraqi people.

Today, the Government does not have the support of the Australian Democrats, or the ALP, or the Greens to send Australian forces to the Gulf without such action being sanctioned by the international community through the United Nations.

Nor do we believe that the Australian people support this forward deployment of ADF personnel, without the international community calling for it.