Self-inflicted injury: going to war in Iraq

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Introduction

Garry Woodard of Melbourne University writes that the path to the Australian Iraq deployment demonstrates “the desirability for changes in decision-making processes on going to war”. Iraq, Woodward argues, “was a failure of policy more than of intelligence. If the government had followed best practice, the intelligence estimate would have provided a basis for and led on to a strategic assessment drawing in policy departments. The fact that the policy departments chose to remain mute on Iraq shows that best practice requires a return to the conventions of the Westminster system, under which the public service initiates and offers frank and fearless advice. This requires eradication of the culture of compliance which was induced by the methods and style of Howard governments.” Woodard concludes that “the executive privilege to make the decision on war, in secret, and to hold only a perfunctory or meaningless debate, is as anachronistic as the Royal Prerogative from which the practice stems.” This essay draws on material treated at greater length in Garry Woodard, We Now Know About Going to War in Iraq, Austral Special Report, 22 November 2007.

Essay - Self-inflicted injury: going to war in Iraq

Australia traditionally goes to war in support of an ally, hoping to enhance the alliance relationship and Australia's long-term security. Iraq was, however, unusual in certain respects, and these demonstrate the desirability for changes in decision-making processes on going to war. The patient, the State, is sick, and a cure will involve both radical surgery and return to well-tried practices of care.

The Prime Minister as decision maker

The Iraq decision was taken essentially by one man, the Prime Minister, and not revisited. In the war against terror declared by US President George W. Bush as a result of 9/11, Australia was committed from the start. This was demonstrated by a succession of statements by Prime Minister John Howard, who was in Washington at the time. He then decided on the way home to invoke the ANZUS treaty.

It is likely, as his contemporary statements hint, that he was briefed that the Bush administration intended proceeding from war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, if it did not immediately yield up Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, to attacking Iraq, to eliminate its reviled and vile dictator, Saddam Hussein.

The political perils of being in the hands of Bush

Howard's commitment put himself, willingly, in the hands of American decision-making. The Bush Administration was inclined towards unilateralism and being a *demandeur*. Its style and method (or lack of it) made it difficult for allies to stay in step, and few stayed the course on Iraq.

Bush started planning war against Iraq when the war in Afghanistan appeared to be over unexpectedly quickly, in November 2001. However, he did not take a decision to declare war, and he made no formal request for allies to participate. The leaders of the UK and Australia were advantaged, in that they did not have to announce either that they intended to go to war, but they were open to criticism that they deceived their parliaments and people. Howard and British Prime Minister Tony Blair were already vulnerable to charges of deception because of their over-use of spin doctors and minders and their embrace of the doctrine of plausible deniability.

Concocting the case for war

Allies going to war need to define a common threat. Devising this was up to the Bush Administration, which was intent on getting rid of Saddam Hussein, come what may. Blair fully shared the American aim, having picked out Saddam Hussein as the ideal target for a doctrine of humanitarian intervention which he expounded in 1999.

Howard did not have the luxury of being so cavalier. Clearly, it was harder for Australians to accept that they were threatened by Saddam Hussein, particularly in a way which would justify Australia exercising its right of self-defence under the UN Charter.

America's justification for war was eliminating Saddam Hussein's supposed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz acknowledged in 2003 that it was an excuse of convenience, fixed on because in an administration of ideologues with a variety of aspirations in the Middle East everyone could agree on it.

The case for eliminating a threat from Iraq required several willing suspensions of disbelief. The case ran that:

- Iraq possessed WMD.
- It had the means of delivery.
- Iraq had links with Al-Qaeda, was complicit in 9/11, and was a likely conduit for WMD to proliferate from States to non-state actors.
- Iraq was a legitimate target of the war on terror.

Iraq, Howard then had to argue, was an imminent, direct and real threat to Australia.

The mills of war

The mills of war planning grind slow but they grind exceeding small. The planning for Iraq, which continued until final Presidential approval on 6 September 2002, took place at Central Command in Tampa, Florida, where an Australian Colonel was integrated from 2001. At various points CENTCOM commander Gen Tommy Franks had been instructed to be ready to move at short notice.

War planning between allies, although always *ad referendum* to governments, creates a momentum of its own. Australian Ambassador to the US Michael Thawley, in claiming credit for an active Australian diplomacy on Iraq, said in the Sir Robert Menzies Lecture on 4 November 2005 that 'on Iraq, we set out clearly what forces we would provide, what we would be prepared to do and what we would not… [O]ptions were and analysed and discussed for months'. British participants, whose concerns would have been shared with Australian colleagues, have revealed that the planning suffered from the fatal flaw of refusing to address the post-hostilities nation building phase.

Blair moved the process along when, while meeting Bush to agree on war in April 2002, he publicly advocated regime change in Iraq and pre-emptive action, which became US doctrine. Howard visited London later that month, and Washington in June. It was apparent to allies by July 2002 that there would be no turning back from war by the Bush Administration.

Leaked documents show that the British government approved military preparations accordingly and decided to prepare public opinion for war. The documents noted the expectation that Australia would follow suit.

The red herring of fishy intelligence

'Preparing the public' in all three countries for war and influencing international opinion involved selective publication of intelligence about the threat from Iraq, the British document later being described by the Foreign Secretary as 'the dodgy dossier… a complete horlicks'. Iraq was a failure of policy more than of intelligence, but policy-makers found it useful to divert attention to the failure of intelligence, notably on WMD.

That failure was particularly important to Howard. He had relied on CIA's intelligence on WMD, and he rested on that as his sole public justification for going to war. This fixation on what he calls in another context 'the simple essence' required being careless with the truth.

We now know that U.S intelligence on WMD was rejected in the assessments of the Australian scientific experts in the Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO), by a senior scientist in the Defence Science and Technology Organisation, who felt strongly enough to write directly to Howard, and by the head of the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), Hans Blix, when Blix called on him in New York on 11 February 2003.

Howard rejected giving UNSCOM a fair chance, a couple more months or less, though Blix was not so explicit in public on the time-frame. That extension of time, which Howard seemed amenable to in an interview in September 2002, could have avoided the need for a disastrous war, but would have achieved the belligerents' aim of bringing Saddam Hussein down, because of the damage to his credibility and demonstration of Iraq's vulnerability to Iran.

All the intelligence communities said that there was no operational link between the secular Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda, but this did not deter their political leaders from implying and asserting it. This was one part of the case for war where the media, with inside knowledge, did put Howard under pressure. He prevaricated, relying on a doomsday scenario (initially developed by his friend,

Vice President Dick Cheney) of WMD getting somehow into the hands of terrorists.

CIA director George Tenet buries Howard's credibility while aiming to praise him when he writes in his memoirs:

> Howard had been one of our closest allies. Not only had he deployed troops to Iraq, but he'd also had the enormous political courage to say that he'd gone to war in Iraq not because of what the intelligence said but because he believed it was the right thing to do.

Howard went to war 'because he believed it was the right thing to do'. Perhaps Tenet is being patronising about Howard, as CIA is about its Australian intelligence partners. Howard did the right thing by being a faithful 'all the way' ally. Bush himself could be remarkably condescending in saluting men with 'cojones' and 'of steel'. However, it is a different matter for his intelligence chief to risk hurting politically an ally by picking out from under him the intelligence foundations of his policy which relied on the CIA, and by praising his fidelity.

The Australian government and regime change

It seems more probable that Tenet's meaning is that that Howard had a moral commitment to getting rid of Saddam Husain, i.e. to regime change, thus sharing the avowed aim of Bush and Blair. This is also an inconvenient truth, for Howard insisted that he had never advocated resume change and would not support war to effect it. That is illegal and was rejected by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), although regrettably neither of these aspects had prominence in Australian policy concerns.

The pieces of evidence from American sources indicating that Howard did not oppose regime change thus go to his credibility. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer now justifies the war so vigorously on this ground that he seems to fail to understand the implications for Howard's reputation.

Apart from its illegally, regime change poses another difficulty for the Australian government: if good enough for Iraq, why not for the other members of Bush's 'axis of evil', Iran and the DPRK? Military intervention for regime change in North Korea could bring about war with China.

The pitfalls of nation-building

The intelligence communities got it right that after the initial hostilities ended, the internal situation in Iraq would be messy, stability and democracy would not be achieved quickly or easily, and chaos and prolonged foreign military occupation could make Iraq a magnet for Muslim extremists from all over the Middle East and open the way for Al-Qaeda to establish a base.

It appears that the British were in the forefront in issuing cautionary political assessments, through the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The CIA provided a worst-case assessment for Bush's meeting with Blair on 7 September, and in conjunction with the State Department, which was making its own assessments, issued two major assessments in January 2003. Yet Blair merely assented on 31 January 2003 when Bush stated his assumption that there would be no serious religious or sectarian strife, and 10 days later Howard was at the White House. The wilfully blind were leading the passively blind.

Drawing on the foreign assessments which would have come to them through normal intelligence and diplomatic channels, the Office of National Assessments (ONA) and DIO also issued assessments

of the post-hostilities situation. Perhaps they made little impact not only because Australian ministers did not want to hear but because they were content to leave it to Bush and Blair. Australian assessments must have seemed something of an academic exercise, because it was intended to limit Australian involvement once hostilities ended. This ignored that occupying powers have continuing obligations under the Fifth Geneva Convention.

The dog that didn't bark

Had ONA, exercising its responsibility to produce a coordinated assessment, in which dissenting views are recorded, prepared and issued a national intelligence assessment on Iraq, the dangers of going to war on questionable grounds and in the shifting sands of Iraq could not have been so easily ignored. If the government had followed best practice, the intelligence estimate would have provided a basis for and led on to a strategic assessment drawing in policy departments.

A comprehensive strategic assessment for ministers on the implications of war in Iraq and Australia's involvement would have assessed the likelihood and risks of failure in the special circumstances of Iraq's long history in the Ottoman Empire, of its democratic deficit, and its religious and sectarian divides, and how they impacted on neighbouring states.

The job of assessing allies is for policy departments rather more than the intelligence community (though to DIO's credit it twice attempted it). The well understood deficiencies in America's record in nation-building, and the insouciance about it shown by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, publicly and in joint war planning, and British alarm about that, should have aroused concern in Canberra.

The lessons were not drawn from Vietnam and Korea, but Howard and Downer have made it clear they have no intention of learning them. One might have thought, however, that they would be guided by the recent lessons of East Timor, where Australia did not act until had secured UNSC approval and broad regional cooperation.

A strategic assessment canvasses the implications for Australia of alternative policies and courses of action. In the case of Iraq, these would include:

- would Australia become a bigger target for Muslim extremists?
- would Australia's standing in Indonesia, Malaysia and the rest of the Muslim world be affected?
- what offsetting initiatives could Australia take, e.g. for an Arab-Israel settlement?
- would Australia be taking on greater long-term obligations in the Middle East than were warranted by its capabilities and national interests and priorities, thus reducing strategic coherence?
- would Australia in acting outside the UN Charter be making itself more vulnerable to aggression over the long term?
- what would be the effects on Australia's reputation as a good international citizen and supporter of international law and a rules-based system?
- should Australia not explore every alternative before acting, or laying itself open to the perception of acting, as though ‘might is right’?

Reversing the deplorable decline of the Westminster system

The fact that the policy departments chose to remain mute on Iraq shows that best practice requires a return to the conventions of the Westminster system, under which the public service initiates and

offers frank and fearless advice. This requires eradication of the culture of compliance which was induced by the methods and style of Howard governments, and which had reached its apogee in 2002.

The culture can only be changed gradually. If Labor, which has made a commitment to return to the Westminster system, forms the next government, it will be possible to take some early steps to signal that change will occur and to oil the wheels. It is generally agreed that these include re-establishing the authority and independence of the Public Service Commissioner, returning to fixed five-year terms for heads of departments as their contracts come up for renewal, abolishing their annual bonuses, which the Prime Minister fixes, and, perhaps most importantly, reducing the size of ministerial staffs from the present bloated 450 odd and making staffers accountable.

The National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSCC) represents a commendable effort at collegiality, in stark contrast to Blair's 'democracy'. However the 'whole of government' approach which Howard claims it has achieved became a black hole for policy-making on Iraq. It has contributed to the culture of compliance under a strong Prime Minister, while giving his colleagues, policy advisers and intelligence heads a comforting participatory sense. With the policy of being all the way with George W. Bush set from the outset and implicitly understood, discussion in the NSCC on Iraq did not rise above monitoring the progress towards war and modalities for Australian participation.

These NSCC's deficiencies could well be inherent in a standing committee bringing together ministers, policy advisers and intelligence assessors. It might be desirable to return to the old system of Cabinet and Cabinet subcommittee government, where officials attended by invitation. It appears that Labor does not intend a change in the system, just more effective support for it through creation of a National Security Adviser and small support staff. These individuals will need to be imbued with the values of independence of mind as intelligence assessors.

Intelligence reform

The Australian intelligence community (AIC) is still digesting the changes recommended after an enquiry by Philip Flood to ensure contestability and accountability. Flood also made a useful recommendation for insulating the AIC from political pressure by instituting formality in requesting the AIC to provide intelligence for public use by politicians.

However, it is recognized internationally that Iraq highlighted the need for more safeguards to be introduced in this area. The British have gone furthest and Gordon Brown is introducing additional reforms, which clearly have relevance to Australia. Little has happened in the US, but the Democrats are likely to establish a watchdog Congressional Intelligence Office, and this is a reminder that Parliamentary oversight of the AIC can be strengthened.

Flood anticipated a further review. If there is a change of government in 2007, there would be advantages in having it, before rushing in to implementing the party platform of setting up a Department of Homeland Security. Flood rejected creating the position of Coordinator, as in the UK, but this might be revisited. The intelligence community, now a multi-billion-dollar enterprise, requires tighter control of budgets, elimination of overlap, and strict standards of accountability (to government and Parliament).

Strengthening democracy and the bond of trust

Gordon Brown has given a lead too on the most important reform demanded by Iraq. This is to democratise the decision-making process on going to war, in order to restore trust in government. Loss of public trust caused the most resounding fall of a British prime minister since Anthony Eden's

complicity with the French and Israelis was revealed in the Suez debacle. In Australia, as in the UK, trust must be restored, and by following Brown's path. The executive privilege to make the decision on war, in secret, and to hold only a perfunctory or meaningless debate, is as anachronistic as the Royal Prerogative from which the practice stems. The decision to send troops to war should be made by Parliament, in a joint sitting.

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Nautilus invites your response

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