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Speeches

12 March 2006

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER THE HON JOHN HOWARD MP ADDRESS TO THE DEAKIN SOCIETY, MELBOURNE "REFLECTIONS ON THE SITUATION IN IRAQ"

E&OE...

During our recent celebrations of the Coalition's ten years in power, I have, as Prime Minister, been publicly reflecting on our Party's many great achievements, as was appropriate to do. But on this occasion, among old friends and senior colleagues, I wish to share some unsettling thoughts about the situation in Iraq.

Three years ago in Sydney, when I spoke to the men and women of the Australian Defence Force, who were gathered on the deck of HMAS Kanimbla, I felt that above all other Australians, they were entitled to know from me why it is that the Government had asked them to go to the Persian Gulf and face the armed forces of a dangerous dictator.

I said then that all the intelligence material collected over recent times, to which Australia had contributed, proved overwhelmingly that Saddam Hussein had maintained his stockpile of chemical and biological weapons and that he was on the brink of nuclear capability. This posed a real and unacceptable threat to the stability and security of our world. I said that unless Iraq was disarmed of its weapons of mass destruction totally and permanently then the Middle East would remain a powder keg, waiting for a match.

I sincerely believed that was true - on the best intelligence and advice that was available at that time. On February, 2003, I told Parliament, that disarming Iraq would bring enormous benefits to the Middle East and be widely welcomed throughout the world. Unfortunately, our expectations in this matter have not yet been realised. Even so, I have continued to hold firm to our commitment, despite the ups and downs of the occupation, because our alliance with the US is vital to the security of Australia.

On May 19, 2004, after my return from a visit to Baghdad, I told the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne that the situation in Iraq was rapidly improving. That the north of the country was relatively peaceful and most of the south was reasonably stable. I pointed out that Iraq was 'no longer ruled by a loathsome and homicidal dictator, and potentially hundreds of thousands of lives have been saved'. I sincerely believed that at the time.

There had been so many encouraging signs of progress. Let me re-iterate some of the signs I mentioned in 2004, and reflect on the situation from today's perspective, as we approach the third anniversary of the occupation.

I said then that electricity, water, telephone and sanitation were gradually being restored to pre-war levels or above. Sadly, this did not happen. As of February this year, 125 projects to provide electricity have been cancelled. Of the 136 projects that were originally pledged to improve Iraqi water and sanitation, only 49 will be ever finished.

I said then that six major water treatment plants had been rehabilitated. Perhaps I should have pointed out that these plants had previously been destroyed by British and US bombs during the 12 years of UN sanctions against the Hussein regime. Today, the water situation in Iraq is dire. Billions of dollars have been shifted from rebuilding vital infrastructure to guarding the borders of Iraq.

I said that all 240 hospitals as well as 1,200 health clinics were fully operational, which was the advice we had received from the then administrator, Mr Paul Bremer. Unfortunately, this turned out to be overly optimistic. On November 2004, at the start the coalition's pacification of the city of Falluja, the city's General Hospital was occupied by US troops and - I am sorry to say - that hospital staff were handcuffed and some patients were dragged from their beds; perhaps for good reasons. Snipers were posted on the roof of the building and ambulances were strafed. On November, 6, the BBC reported that US air strikes had reduced the newly built Nazzal Emergency Hospital to rubble.

One doctor reportedly told Reuters, and I quote: "There is not a single surgeon in Falluja. We had one ambulance hit by US fire and a doctor wounded. There are scores of injured civilians in their homes whom we can't move. A 13-year-old child just died in my hands." Now I do not wish to labour the point. But it should be conceded that an impartial examination actions of the Coalition of the Willing during operations in Falluja has raised uncomfortable issues for our Government. On the face of it, the Geneva Conventions and core articles of the UN Declaration on Human Rights have been ignored. During the siege of Falluja, many Iraqi women and children were caught in the line of fire and some civilians

were shot as they tried to swim across the Tigris. It has even been reported that weapons of dubious legality were used in Falluja, such as cluster bombs, napalm, incendiary white-phosphorus and thermobaric, or "fuel-air" explosives, which can have the effect of a tactical nuclear weapon without residual radiation.

The International Red Cross estimates that at least 60% of those killed in the assault on the city were women, children and the elderly; a pattern of destruction that has persisted throughout the occupation of Iraq, and, as much as we would like to shut our eyes, this has served to boost the recruitment of insurgents and harden their resolve. In May last year, the city of al-Qaim near the Syrian border was the target of a major offensive known as Operation Matador, which resulted in hundreds of Iraqi casualties. This operation also displaced thousand of civilians, destroyed entire neighborhoods, polluted water supplies and put one hospital out of action. Six months later in al-Qaim, Operation Steel wiped out the General Hospital, other medical centers, some mosques and schools, even the electricity station.

These are the facts. There are many more examples. And they raise serious concerns for the future predicament which our Government and our party may find ourselves facing. We have been lucky up to this point, because the full extent of the mayhem resulting from our U.N sanctioned occupation has not been dwelt upon by the Australian media. You can draw your own conclusions why this is so. However, having been kept well briefed on the conflict by our intelligence agencies, and I can assure you that many unpleasant details are still to emerge.

Also, on a personal note, it would be inaccurate for me to maintain that the events unfolding during course of the occupation have left me unmoved. It has long been my habit to keep acquainted with opinions opposed to my own, and to canvas a wide range of views. If an edited version of this talk is made available, it may reference sources from the internet.

Under international law, all military forces owe a 'duty of care' to the civilians of an occupied city. And I am starting to ask myself if this is a commitment we have betrayed. In fact, I dare to wonder if we have betrayed the very ideals that I invoked in my support of the invasion.

In my 2004 speech to the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne, I said that, 'Iraq now has a growing and robust independent media, which is absolutely essential for the development and maintenance of a healthy democracy'. Well, I am afraid that was a little premature. Our US partners thought it necessary to suppress the more irresponsible organs of opinion. Several editors were arrested. And while I accepted assurances from our allies that the bombing of the Baghdad offices of Al Jazeera in 2003 was

an accident, I must say, that in light of the recent unearthing of the Downing Street memo, the contents of which are available to my Government, I now hold grave doubts about the official story. All told, since the start of hostilities in Iraq, it appears that 82 media personnel have lost their lives.

I must say, that it came as a surprise to members of my Government when General George Casey recently re-asserted the right of the US military to plant paid-for stories in the Iraqi press. We believe this sets an unfortunate precedent, in that it may lead to suspicion among Iraqi citizens that that the West prefers a paid press to a free press.

I also noted in my 2004 speech that 'Australia had helped to re-establish the Iraqi Ministry of Agriculture, [and] set up a payments system for the 2003 harvest and used our experience to help Iraqi farmers bring in the bumper summer grains harvest'. Perhaps I should have been more forthright about that experience. For many years the Australian Wheat Board has been helping the Iraqi Government bring in bumper summer grains from Australia. We have achieved this by channelling millions of dollars of hidden commissions into the coffers of the man previously described as a loathsome and repellent dictator. To be frank, we had been privately funding a regime that we publicly claimed was a threat to the world, and I can see now that this might lead some people to question our probity.

All in all, since the war began I have consistently maintained that the situation in Iraq was measurably better than it was under Saddam Hussein.

I held to this belief even during the dark days of the Abu Ghraib abuses, which caused many in the region to question whether democracy would make the slightest difference. But I strongly argued at the time that the difference would be apparent for all to see, because the victims of abuse would not only be able, but would be encouraged to speak out, to seek redress and to find justice.

Sadly, very few victims have been able to find justice. And those senior figures who issued the orders to turn up the heat on detainees, have not been properly investigated. In the matter of our own citizen, David Hicks, who remains to this day Guantanamo Bay, often in solitary isolation, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish his predicament from that which would have faced a prisoner of Saddam Hussein. I believe the Department of Foreign Affairs has been remiss in accepting the assurances of some US officials at face value.

I speak to you here openly, and with sadness. I have no intention of repeating or elaborating these remarks outside this room. For decades, many of you have stayed loyal to the principles of our Party. However, it is not wise for any leader to mislead himself, and I have no wish to mislead

you. Like our good friend Tony Blair, I too admit to episodes of anguish. I worry the situation is getting worse. Not only in Iraq, but elsewhere in the world. You will of course be making up your own minds as you watch the news in the coming weeks.

I note that the latest US Country Reports on Human Rights concedes that in Iraq, 'civic life and the social fabric remain under intense strain from the widespread violence'. The US ambassador to Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, has said we have 'opened a Pandora's box in Iraq'. There is mounting evidence of arbitrary detention and torture committed by government forces, both police and military.

During my recent trip to India, also horribly touched with extremist violence, I was reminded by their soft spoken Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, that the British had seriously erred by clinging too long to their former colony. Despite widespread opposition to their presence, British politicians continued to insist that their departure would lead to chaos. Dr Singh said, 'But it would be our chaos, don't you see?' At that moment I understood what he was saying.

There is tremendous pressure from the US for our troops to remain in Iraq, and of course mutual loyalty is a vital component of the alliance. But the longer the Coalition of the Willing remains, the more we are detested, and the more blood is shed. The country is already tearing itself apart, so I am asking you, could our departure really make it any worse?

Perhaps it is time for Iraqis to regain control of their future, and for the coalition of the willing to be willing to leave the stage. When I say this, I speak as a troubled private citizen, and not as the Prime Minister of Australia.

Flying home from India, I started to ask myself what a leader like Mahatma Gandhi would do, but I feared I would not be able to live up to the answer, unless I have some wise advice from my longtime friends. Please look into your hearts and let me know what you find.

Thank you.

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