

3. Terrorism

What can we learn about the conservatives' vision of Australia's future from Howard's response to terrorism?

Bali

In October 2002, fundamentalist Muslim terrorists murdered over 200 people in a bar in Bali. Almost half of them were Australian. The Australian government and the Australian people responded with great sympathy, support and resolve.

Despite their very recent difficulties over East Timor, the Australian and Indonesian governments negotiated agreements that enabled joint police and intelligence operations. Over the following years, this highly professional crime fighting operation secured the arrest of the perpetrators of the Bali bombing and helped prevent further terrorist acts in the region.

At no stage was there mention of going to war. Going to war with Indonesia in order to target twenty or a hundred terrorists made no sense at all. As we saw later in the United Kingdom and in Spain, terrorism is a crime, and best fought as a police operation.

Australia, in common with Britain, has highly sophisticated police and intelligence resources. They succeed in fighting terrorism at least in part because they are allowed to do the job professionally, without political interference.

Howard's response to local terrorism, when uncomplicated by his secret deals with the Bush administration, was entirely proper, measured and precisely targeted.

War on Terror

The Australian–Indonesian operation focused on capturing terrorists and destroying their networks. When Howard signed up to George Bush’s War on Terror he probably thought he would be doing more of the same, fighting terrorist networks on a global scale. But if he thought that, he was wrong.

On the momentous day of September 11, 2001, John Howard was in Washington. He had been to the Pentagon the day before and was preparing to address the United States Congress the next day. His speech was cancelled due to the attacks, but still he attended the highly emotional meeting of Congress, mixing with Senators and members of the Bush administration.

The following day, he announced:

I’ve also indicated that Australia will provide all support that might be requested of us by the United States in relation to any action that might be taken ... you must bear in mind that this is an occasion where America must understand that she’s got friends ... we have to accept that this is an occasion where we should stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Americans, because this is not just an assault on America, it’s an assault on the way of life that we hold dear in common.¹

Howard promised support, on the assumption that they would be targeting terrorist networks, such as al-Qa’ida. Subsequently, Australia joined a war in Afghanistan that was targeting terrorists. However, while Howard was making his unconditional statements of support to the Bush administration, American strategic policy was being turned upside down.

In the USA, the neo-conservatives were a powerful force whose aim was to dramatically increase the influence of America throughout the world. With the terrorist attack on New York, they recognised their opportunity to make a move.

The Project for the New American Century,² a neo-conservative think tank that included Bush’s Cheney/Rumsfeld/Wolfowitz team, had long argued for toppling Saddam Hussein’s regime. They had argued this in

1998 in a letter to President Clinton³ and again in 2000, in their report, *Rebuilding America's Defenses*, saying:

While the unresolved conflict in Iraq provides the immediate justification [for US military presence], the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein.⁴

When the Americans were forced to vacate Saudi Arabia following 9/11, this neoconservative desire to attack Iraq became more urgent; they needed a new military base for their domination of the region. They were on the hunt for a justification for war. The attacks of September 11 provided the opportunity they had been waiting for. In fact, there was no relationship between 9/11 and Iraq, but this was seen as a mere detail. Dick Cheney in particular was responsible for politicising the United States analysis of events and re-casting the intelligence in a way that enabled the leadership to use 9/11 as a pretext for regime change in Iraq.

With apparent sincerity, Howard signed up to 'stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Americans' in their hour of need, but instead of fighting terrorists, he found himself caught up in the new ideological struggle for American domination of the world.

Howard may have been seduced with false intelligence, but he willingly submitted. Whether it was to fight terrorists or overthrow the Iraq government, he was ready and willing to commit Australian military personnel. Despite the change of enemy, he remained a full partner in the War on Terror.

In assessing terrorism, Australia is not led by the head of our Australian Federal Police, Mick Keelty, who articulated what every Australian and every observer understood: that our participation in Iraq increased the threat of terrorist attacks. However, Howard forced Keelty to retract this statement. Indeed, our fight against terrorism is being led by the man who accepted the American lie about the connection between 9/11 and Iraq and has propagated that lie ever since.

Australians were supportive of Howard when he stood side-by-side with the Americans after 9/11. However, they did not go along with him when he was seduced by the Bush administration into its war to dominate the Middle East and the world. It is fair to see this war as a betrayal of the both the United States and the Australian heritage as outlined by Simon Crean: the equal rights of all nations, respect for the opinions of all peoples and the idea that all men are created equal.

Osama bin Laden has reason to thank Howard for his stance. A number of reports suggest that bin Laden's recruitment of new terrorists was not going well in 2002, but thanks to the Iraq war in 2003, al-Qa'ida grew rapidly.

But while the Iraq war has been a tragic mistake from many perspectives, it has (until now) been a political triumph for Howard: images of him as a heroic war prime minister play well in the polls. Iraq and terrorism have provided opportunities for building fear in the community. With pervasive fear of terrorism and his ability to portray himself as strong on defence, Howard was on to a winner.

However, we have to ask whether or not he is, as Kevin Rudd suggested, our greatest security threat. It can be argued that Howard needs the threat of terrorism. And, ironically, terrorists need Howard and the United States to keep the troops in Iraq for as long as possible. This gives them the reasons they need to inflame hatred of America. The presence of our troops supports terrorists' ongoing recruitment programs and provides them with training opportunities.

Perversely, Howard's future is best assured if his terrorism strategy doesn't work. Imagine: it is two weeks before the 2007 election, Howard is trailing in the polls and suddenly there is a major terrorist attack in Australia. Who would benefit politically?

Howard does well out of the fear of terrorism.

How serious is Howard about terrorism?

What is Howard's track record on terrorism?

We have seen his excellent response to the Balinese attacks and his joining with the United States in Afghanistan. But he was seduced by the United States to join their fight for global dominance in Iraq. What about the big threat—the weapons of mass destruction?

All terrorism experts agree that the greatest threat from terrorism is not the ‘small’ bomb or aeroplane that can kill hundreds. The real threat lies in weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons that can kill tens of thousands and devastate whole cities. What has Howard done to reduce this risk?

The most effective and widely accepted arms control agreement has been the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) established in 1968. As of early 2000, one hundred and eighty seven states were signatories to this Treaty. The only non-signatory countries were Cuba, Israel, India, and Pakistan, and it appears North Korea has withdrawn from the Treaty.

A robust NPT provides the most effective way of preventing nuclear weapons falling into the hands of the more sophisticated terrorists of the future. This is because the Treaty controls all movements of nuclear materials, and potentially involves every nation in the world. A weak Treaty could easily lead to nuclear terrorism within a decade or two.

The prime ministers of Australia and Canada are uniquely positioned to influence international policies on nuclear safeguards because, between them, these two nations control 80 per cent of the world’s uranium supply. In a 2006 Australian government review of the nuclear energy industry, the Director General of the Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office said:

Australia’s position as a leading uranium supplier gives us influence to promote non-proliferation and to contribute to the development of [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguards – through Australia’s seat on the [International Atomic Energy Agency] Board of Governors, and diplomatic and technical activities.⁵

If Howard were serious about terrorism, he would be working with the Canadian Government to strengthen the NPT.

This is an area where the political Left in Australia has also been weak. While they are willing to grandstand on uranium mining and nuclear power in Australia, they seem oblivious to the dangers of nuclear material already in circulation around the world. Only our 2007 Australian of the year, Tim Flannery, has had the courage to suggest that nuclear waste is a global problem where Australia has something to offer. Our capacity for supply of uranium gives us tremendous leverage when it comes to strengthening the NPT.

What does Howard do with this opportunity? Howard is very enthusiastic about the potential of nuclear power and the economic benefits of our selling uranium. But, when talk turns to the Treaty and safeguards, his tone becomes less enthusiastic. Ever the pragmatist, he sees these provisions as obligations and obstacles to business, rather than opportunities to prevent future nuclear terrorism.

For example, Australia has a long-held policy of not selling uranium to non-signatories of the NPT, such as India. However, after George Bush recently agreed to sell nuclear technology to India, the Australian government has been preparing us for a change of policy so we can sell uranium to India.

Is this a good idea? Probably not. There may be strategic reasons for this U-turn, such as drawing India into the International Atomic Energy Agency's inspections regime. However, it is difficult to have confidence that either Howard or Bush is acting in the best interests of their respective nations when both leaders appear to be driven by the nuclear industry and its wish to expand.

The Australian people are being softened up for a major change of policy by the Foreign Minister, who takes pains to disguise the radical nature of this move:

You can take the view ... that we will have nothing to do with [India] ... or you can take the view that the Bush administration has taken that, well, at least you can embrace some of India's

nuclear industry and you can have inspections by the [International Atomic Energy Agency] of some of those facilities. Some inspections and some transparency is better than none.⁶

This is hardly an emphatic defence of the NPT and stronger safeguards. Howard has failed to take a clear leadership position on strengthening the NPT. Perhaps his pragmatism leaves him afraid of challenging the United States position. The United States has itself a poor history of adherence to the Treaty. There is not only the currently proposed sale of nuclear technology to India, but there was President Regan's early rejection of disarmament and his endeavours to restart the arms race. They seem to be contravening the treaty in their supply of nuclear weapons to Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey under a NATO nuclear weapons sharing agreement.⁷

Strengthening the Treaty would require principled leadership and a strong international commitment to multilateralism, (that is, agreements that embrace all, or most, nations). However, the Bush administration has pursued a policy of unilateralism, seeing itself as the dominant world power and directly attacking multilateral organisations (the United Nations) and treaties (such as the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) because the UN and its multilateral agreements are seen to be in direct competition with the US vision of itself as leader of the world.

This position was made explicit by the United States ambassador to the UN between August 2005 and December 2006, John Bolton, who said (some years before his appointment):

The point that I want to leave with you in this very brief presentation is where I started, is there is no United Nations. There is an international community that occasionally can be led by the only real power left in the world, and that's the United States, when it suits our interest and when we can get others to go along. And I think it would be a real mistake to count on the United Nations as if it's some disembodied entity out there that can function on its own.⁸

By locking himself into the United States vision of world domination, Howard is unable to take a lead in the multilateral fight for a stronger NPT.

As long as he downplays the issue of nuclear safeguards, Howard cannot be said to be serious about terrorism.

For Howard the pragmatist, terrorism is full of opportunities. It has enabled him ingratiate himself with the Bush administration. It enabled him to raise the levels of fear in our community and then offer himself at elections as the one who can be trusted to provide security.

However, he has not used his special position to create a safer world.

Conclusion

We have seen that, when our police and intelligence services manage the Australian response to terrorism, the outcomes are very good.

However, the moment Howard tied our position to that of the Bush administration we lost control to a much bigger political agenda. We now find ourselves partnering the United States in its strategic push to dominate the United Nations, the Middle East and indeed the world.

Howard's claim that the war in Iraq would make us safer is patently false. The distinction was obvious to most Australians from the beginning. The Labor party, for example saw a clear distinction between fighting terrorism (Afghanistan) and the so-called War on Terror in Iraq. It supported fighting terrorism, but not the United States' ambitions for world domination.

Australians support the United States alliance, but not unconditionally. They understand that there will be times when our interests will diverge.

It is clear from the past decade that Howard and his conservative supporters consider our relationship with the United States alliance to be one of subservience, with no room for independence. On the most

important terrorist threat of all, weapons of mass destruction, Howard appears unwilling to use our special position to lead the push for a stronger NPT.

In reviewing the whole picture, it is difficult to believe that Howard is working for the good of the Australian people. Ever since he threw in his lot with the Bush administration, it seems his courage has deserted him and he has become confused about where his loyalties belong.