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## **A minister's perspective**

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My experiences of Australia's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are from a political perspective. My thoughts and recollections are not scholarly, and they might or might not be shared by others who were also part of the government at that time, but nonetheless allow me to relate some lessons learned.

These wars have been huge endeavours for Australia. They have touched so many Australians in different ways. And even though they continue today, it is worthwhile to pause and reflect on the experiences and lessons learned. Even to try to understand why we are still engaged, after the longest period of continuous deployment in our history, is important.

It was a privilege to be Australia's Defence Minister, and I will forever be grateful to the men and women of the services who carried out the missions set by government with professionalism and determination. I equally appreciated the service of officials of the department who were critical enablers in all missions. I was lucky to have military and departmental leadership of the highest calibre. We shared some difficult moments, and they excelled themselves.

The operations in Afghanistan and Iraq were a result of, and continue to be a result of, political decisions. I was one of the politicians making decisions at critical times, and appreciate that it is just as important for politicians to learn from past experiences as it is for the military.

I came to Defence from the Environment portfolio. I was given the Environment ministry because it had always been a conflict zone for my side of politics. I won a few of the environment battles and settled a few more by peaceful means. Nevertheless, it might still seem for military people to have been an unusual path to Defence.

There is no minimum qualification to be Defence Minister, or even to be a politician. There is no one course of study. You have to go back a long way to find a Defence Minister with military service. Occasionally there is someone in the Cabinet with military experience, but again, it is rare. It is even unusual to find someone with a background in strategic policy. It is therefore not surprising that the defence leadership sometimes finds the political world a bit bewildering, or at least untidy.

So how does a group of apparently unqualified individuals make a decision to take the country to war? Or, more particularly in the context of this conference, to deploy Australian forces to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003? The latter decision is still the subject of critical debate in some circles. It is easy to say that politicians make a determination of what is in the national interest. But how do they determine what is in the national interest?

Each politician is influenced by individual values and experiences. In my case, I was trained in the law. I believed in a rules-based order, both domestically and internationally. In the early 1990s I was working to build democracies in the post-Cold War era because I believed in the basic freedoms that underpin democracy. Before that I focused on getting political prisoners out of jails in Cuba and elsewhere. I believed in universal human rights. I am also a globalist. I believe in the interdependency of nation-states. I also believe in alliances based on shared values. And I have always feared the indiscriminate and destructive power of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).<sup>1</sup> I started working towards non-proliferation of WMD more than 40 years ago. From that background I assessed my attitude to our military participation in the wars in question.

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1 That is, nuclear, radiological, chemical or biological weapons that can cause mass killings or great damage.

In relation to Afghanistan, the cruelty and barbarism and the inter-territorial nature of the 9/11 attacks on the United States had an enormous effect on me. Even today, I cannot stand on the World Trade Center site in New York without shaking my head in disbelief. How could this happen? What is the world coming to?

The attacks on the United States led our Prime Minister, John Howard, immediately to invoke the ANZUS Treaty, although in technical terms that was a decision for Cabinet, which we made a few days later on his return from the United States. We all saw this as not only an attack on our ally the United States but also, and fundamentally, an attack on our shared values.

I remember the meeting by telephone of the leadership group within Cabinet, held the morning after 9/11 when we took advice from our intelligence agencies and took decisions to ensure Australia's immediate security. We saw the attack on the United States as equally directed at us, and sadly we were proven right sometime later, when those who shared the al-Qaeda ideology deliberately targeted Australians in Bali and Jakarta in 2002 and 2005, in neighbouring Indonesia, as well as in Afghanistan.

ANZUS might be primarily a commitment to consult, but in the circumstances I have just sketched it is not surprising that a short time later we took the decision to commit forces to Afghanistan and against the Taliban regime. In Afghanistan, al-Qaeda was permitted bases and given support. To remove the threat also required the defeat of the Taliban. The Afghanistan response had United Nations Security Council support and was not particularly controversial. Removing the Taliban did run the risk of creating a vacuum in governance, but this was a responsibility the United Nations was willing to assume.

It is interesting to reflect on the fact that if the Taliban had not provided comfort and support to al-Qaeda, it might have been permitted by the international community to continue to abuse its own Afghan people for some time. In Australia this was regarded as an internal affair, even if we did not approve of it.

## Afghanistan

Australian troops were deployed after I became Defence Minister but pursuant to a decision made before my appointment. I remember visiting Kabul after the deployment and meeting the UN Secretary General's Special Representative, Lakhdar Brahimi. It was in part to brief him on the Australian mission objectives and in part to explore how Australia might assist the post-war reconstruction and transition in governance. It was all reasonably orthodox in an environment where the operations seemed to be going well.

I guess the first mildly controversial decision I was involved in was the government's decision to withdraw special forces from Afghanistan. It was said by some that this was in preparation for pending operations in Iraq. In truth, both the government and I were concerned with avoiding mission creep. The advice of the Defence leadership was that the task for which our special forces were sent had been achieved.

The next big government decision in relation to Afghanistan was to return to the theatre with both special forces and a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). I had been a strong advocate of the need for the international community to support the development of sustainable institutions and basic necessities such as health, education and infrastructure. It is not only a good thing to do in development terms but also guards against the return of another extremist regime. However, the overlap between the role of the military in providing security and civilians in providing humanitarian and development aid is complicated, even in seemingly straightforward circumstances. In this scenario, it was made more difficult by the fact that Afghanistan was never really post-conflict. Nevertheless, to me, development was essential if Afghanistan was to ever stand a chance of normalcy.

I took to the National Security Committee of Cabinet a bid for a PRT and came out with not only a PRT but also a government decision to return the special forces to Afghanistan. This was an acknowledgement of the need to transition to development and a recognition that the security situation was not as far advanced as we had earlier believed.

The role of the military in nation-building is not straightforward. With its 'can do' attitude, the military sometimes overestimates what it is able to achieve. It is for the politicians to set the mission parameters,

and they should be realistic in assessing what is for the military and what requires other elements. The challenge is to get the right mix. I do not think the international community invested enough in nation-building in Afghanistan. But if they had, it still might not have worked. Unfortunately, Afghanistan will be a work in progress for a long time.

## Iraq

Despite what some might say, the intervention in Iraq did not commence as an operation against terrorism. Certainly, for our part, it was not an operation to secure oil, but was a response to the perceived threat posed by Saddam Hussein's WMD program.

Saddam Hussein had had WMDs, and even used them against his own people, at little international cost. What had changed was the risk threshold the United States was prepared to accept. As with Afghanistan, this related to 9/11. President Clinton knew al-Qaeda in Afghanistan posed a threat, but his limited response had not removed that threat. No subsequent president could take the same risk after 9/11.

President Bush saw Saddam Hussein in the same light. He was a threat. He had previously invaded his neighbours and drawn the United States, Australia and others into that conflict. The inability of the UN processes to satisfy the US administration that Saddam had both forgone his mass destruction weaponry and complied with UN Security Council resolutions that he disarm and verify left a risk too great to accept.

History showed that conflict in the region flowing from Saddam Hussein's unquenched expansionist goals would in all likelihood again draw us in. But this time it might subject Australian forces to chemical and biological weapons. This was a risk we felt was too great for us to bear. The national interest was therefore to support our ally in the heavy lifting and to protect against what might become a direct threat to Australians and their interests.

At the time of the Iraq invasion, did Saddam Hussein still possess weapons of mass destruction? I had watched the UN processes intently. There was always an ambiguity in Saddam Hussein's response. He always seemed to be hedging. There were a lot of wise heads after the event, but my intelligence briefings at the time were that he did maintain those

capabilities, biological and chemical, but not nuclear. In fact, I was briefed on what was believed to be his command and control regime, including who would give the command for the use of those weapons. I will never forget the briefings. Defence insisted that I be inoculated against anthrax before travelling to Iraq.

Nevertheless, I wanted to hear different perspectives. I travelled to the United States and listened to their intelligence services. Their brief was similar, although in some aspects they were even more confident. I followed this with further briefings in the United Kingdom. Again I was presented with similar views, and their assessment was shared by intelligence services in France, Israel and Russia. So this was hardly an invention of politicians.

It is easy to be wise after the event, but decision-makers do not have the benefit of hindsight. It would seem that intelligence services around the world got it wrong. I accepted intelligence assessments that turned out to be wrong in their conclusions. That is no one's fault. Intelligence assessment is not a precise science. Rather, it is a judgement based on the best available information at the time.

I certainly accept that Australia's intelligence agencies were acting professionally and in good faith. But they were clearly influenced by Saddam Hussein's past record, as were we. The complication here was that Saddam Hussein ruled through fear, and WMD and his willingness to use those weapons helped to safeguard his survival. It would seem that he had complied with the Security Council resolutions, but to ensure his authority internally and in the region, he chose to maintain an ambiguity.

Saddam Hussein apparently believed that leaving an element of doubt on the question of whether he had disposed of his WMD would not lead to a military intervention by the United States. This was a bluff he lost, because he failed to appreciate how the risk appetite in the United States had changed after 9/11. The Taliban had made a similar mistake in Afghanistan.

I also want to address the allegation made by some that we had committed to war in Iraq before the Cabinet decision that immediately preceded the public announcement. There is a distinction between preparing for the decisions Cabinet might make and the making of such a decision. No decision was made until it was made by Cabinet.

I had been party to decisions over some time to support the ADF being prepared in the event that Cabinet made a decision to commit Australian forces to combat. It always struck me as a sensible thing to do, and I said so on a number of occasions. Even without my endorsement, I would expect the ADF to be planning for various scenarios. It is what good militaries do. But some preparations, such as entering the US planning process, did require my political imprimatur.

I concede that this is a difficult area. If it came to pass that we chose to be part of a US-led military operation, the more we understood about the objectives and plans the better off we would be, not only in maximising the effectiveness of our contribution but also in minimising casualties. The worry is that by undertaking such preparations, our ally assumes a commitment that had not been made. It is even trickier if we are in fact contributing to the development of the plans. Therefore, the decision to enter preparations at this level had to have political endorsement.

The legal basis for the war was another area in which we were criticised by some. An Australian Government will not commit to military operations without being satisfied that the decision is sound in law. We believe in a rules-based international order. In this instance, the legal premise was Iraq's failure to comply with the UN Security Council resolutions designed to remove the threat associated with Saddam Hussein's WMD through a direction to disarm and verify. We decided that the UN processes designed to lead to a peaceful solution had been exhausted and that we should join a so-called coalition of the willing. This was a political judgement for which we must accept responsibility.

On a personal basis, I would argue that a contemporary interpretation of the doctrine of self-defence might also have provided a legal justification. It seemed to me that the construct of self-defence in relation to WMD is very different from a construct of what amounts to self-defence in relation to traditional threats.

One political lesson learned from this conflict was the need for a well-developed plan to address the 'day after' issues. What was to happen the day after the removal of Saddam Hussein and his regime? There was not going to be a UN Security Council administration. This was a coalition of the willing, and the partners had to have a plan for governance as well as security. It was on my mind, because it might be said that the ADF

was part of an occupying force and therefore had legal responsibilities. In the end, we sidestepped this responsibility, arguing that we were not an occupying party.

In this instance the plan was not as well developed as it should have been. I do not think the development of the plan should have been left to the United States. To accept responsibilities in a coalition of the willing should also include accepting a share of responsibility in what was to follow. To be fair, I do not think we were even consulted on what turned out to be two of the most unwise decisions following the conflict: to disband the Iraq army and the Ba'ath Party. On the other hand, I think we preferred to pass these responsibilities to others. Before the war, when talking about building democracies, I used to stress the importance of growing institutions. New institutions cannot simply be imposed if the goal is a democratic and stable state.

Another area that turned out to be quite challenging and in which there was overlap between the ADF and political decision-makers related to the rules of engagement. We of course made the decision that we would be part of a US-led force, but with Australian forces under Australian command and operating to Australian rules of engagement. The rules under which we operated would be different from some others who were not parties to the same humanitarian conventions.

By and large, from my perspective, the United States was respectful and accommodated the differences, particularly in the early years. Problems tended to develop more in the frustrations of the occupying power, as the war became an insurgency operation, particularly in relation to Australians embedded in US force structures. The Australian chain of command became more of a formality than a practice. Australia's responsibilities in relation to prisoners was contentious and would have benefited from more forethought.

## Lessons

There are a few lessons that I think should be learned by the political class. Both conflicts have demonstrated the effectiveness and limitations of military force. Routing al-Qaeda and removing the Taliban from government on the one hand, and defeating the orthodox military

of Saddam Hussein and removing him from office on the other, were relatively straightforward and successful operations. Western military forces are good at such work.

Combatting the insurgencies that subsequently evolved, in part in response to the ongoing presence of foreign forces and the application of asymmetric warfare,<sup>2</sup> proved much more difficult and should have received more thought. This reconstruction of the battlespace should have been anticipated. We were naïve to believe the Iraqi people would simply rise up and fill a vacuum, particularly after we disbanded their institutions.

Continuing military operations have been largely couched as counter-terrorism when the real challenge has been nation-building, for which militaries are not well suited. Sometimes politicians over-rely on defence forces to solve problems for which force is not the best solution. A military presence might be necessary because of an ongoing security threat, but it must be a supportive element.

Both conflicts illustrated how little we in the West knew or understood about both societies, including the tribal divides in Afghanistan and the sectarian divides in Iraq. We do not fight wars in a vacuum, and politicians need to better appreciate the social and cultural environments to which we send our forces

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2 Asymmetric warfare concerns warfare between forces with greatly differing power whereby one side seeks to gain advantage through the use of unconventional weapons and tactics.

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