



“Howard must come clean on withdrawal from Iraq”

KATE ELLIS ON AUSTRALIA'S ROLE IN A WAR WITH NO END IN SIGHT

FOR 11 frightening days thousands of Aussies have been caught up in a crisis in Lebanon, so far removed from anything that we experience back here in Australia that it's hard for us to fully comprehend.

As we switch on our TVs to see the evening news, we only get glimpses of the horrors of bloody conflict – bombed-out buildings, kids scrawling taunting messages on bombs yet to be delivered, and above all the death and carnage of innocent civilians.

I'm reminded of a conversation I had with a taxi driver during the FIFA World Cup last month, where he told me that the international soccer competition is the closest Australia ever gets to experiencing warfare, given that Australia is “never involved in any real wars”.

And I thought how very lucky we are to be here, in a place so far removed from the horrors of armed conflict that we can be forgiven for forgetting that we ARE involved in a war – one that daily threatens the lives of Australian troops.

But, as the world's attention now turns to the horrors of the Middle East, I think it's vital that we remind ourselves of Australia's military actions, particularly our deployment in Iraq.

There is no more serious decision ever made by a Government than the decision to send our nation to war. Yet Prime Minister John Howard's justification for that decision has been rewritten at every turn of the Iraq war.

We were first told that we must go to search for weapons of mass destruction, but none were found. We were then told that we must stay for regime change, but that new regime is now in place, albeit far from stable.

More recently we were told that we must stay to protect the Japanese, but the Japanese Government last week completed the full withdrawal of its troops, declaring its humanitarian mission a success.

And now that they're gone? We're now told it's for security overwatch. The Prime Minister says that we cannot leave until the job is done, but what job is that? He is constantly changing the job description.

At the same time, we have watched in growing numbers other coalition member states withdrawing their troops, including New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, Spain, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Hungary, Nicaragua, Bulgaria, the Philippines, Moldova, Tonga, Iceland and Japan, with Italy and South Korea in the process of complete withdrawal. These countries are not “cutting and running” as the Prime Minister's spin doctors might like us to think, but have made considered decisions to withdraw on the basis of their own national interests and in the interests of international stability.

Last August, the former chief of Australia's Defence Force General Peter Cosgrove put forward Australia's case for withdrawal from Iraq, saying on ABC television:

“I think we've got to train the Iraqis as quickly as we can. And to a point where we take one of the

focal points of terrorist motivation away. And that is foreign troops.” But a year on the Prime Minister still has us contributing to that “focal point of terrorist motivation”, and what's more this is done without a thorough explanation as to why, without any indication of an exit strategy, and without regard to the concerns of the Australian people.

BE BELIEVE that we should never have involved ourselves in this war. But even those who say it was the right decision are justified in asking how long this deployment, which the Howard Government promised would be for “months and not years”, will last. Because the reality is that we've now been there for three years and four months, and there remains an eerie silence from the Prime Minister on the question of an exit strategy. Now is the time for a strong public debate on the logistics of withdrawal. We have missed a logical opportunity for withdrawal along with the Japanese, the personnel we were told we were there to support.

We must now place sufficient public pressure on the Prime Minister for him to come clean, involve us in the debate and provide clear, public decisions about our commitments in Iraq. What is happening over there, after all, is done in our name.

My taxi driver was sadly mistaken. The lives of Australian soldiers are being put on the line every day in Iraq and I think it's more than fair for us to ask why, and for how long?

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DANGER ZONE: Members of the Australian Air Force Airfield Defence Guard patrol Baghdad International Airport