

Howard ponders an unhappy anniversary

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Four years ago next week we invaded Iraq, and John Howard plans a big speech to mark the anniversary. Howard talks about Iraq often, but he has not set out a detailed explanation of his policy since that week, when in three big speeches he explained why invading Iraq was a good idea.

Next week's speech will not be easy to draft. His staff will find little to help or inspire them in Howard's words of four years ago, when he talked a lot about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction; that does not make compelling reading today. Worse, back then Howard said not a word about what would happen after Saddam was gone. Back then he was saying Australian troops would be home in a few months.

So there are no lines from 2003 that Howard can quote next week to prove his prescience and vindicate his decision. So why make a speech to mark the anniversary? Presumably, this being an election year, Howard believes there is political benefit in doing so. National security has been central to Howard's projection of himself as a national leader, and to his ascendancy over his Labor opponents. Iraq is central to this. Mark Latham's rash promise in 2004 to bring Australian troops in Iraq "home by Christmas" destroyed his credibility on national security. Howard evidently feels he needs to sustain his ascendancy on Iraq to win another term.

Maybe, but 2007 is not 2004, and Kevin Rudd is not Mark Latham. Howard seems to have had trouble recognising how much the politics of the Iraq issue have changed. Events of the past few weeks have taken him by surprise. First, he tried to link Rudd's policy of partial withdrawal to the withdrawal strategy proposed by Barack Obama and other US Democrats. That only reinforced the impression that Rudd is closer to the US mainstream than Howard. It also provided Obama with an opening to remind voters here of the gap between Howard's Churchillian rhetoric on Iraq and his Lilliputian commitment of troops on the ground.

Second, Howard was taken by surprise when Tony Blair announced British troop withdrawals, making it hard to reconcile support for Blair with criticism of Rudd for a similar policy. And third, he seems to have been surprised when the US Vice-President, Dick Cheney, assured voters that Rudd's policy of partial withdrawal would not damage the US alliance.

Howard was no doubt hoping for something more like George Bush's reaction to Latham's policy in 2004. With Howard next to him on the White House lawn, Bush twice called Latham's policy "disastrous". Bush obviously intended to destroy Latham's credibility on national security. Last month Cheney did the opposite - he established Rudd's credibility as an alliance manager. Howard must have felt betrayed.

Worst, Howard has lost the option of withdrawing troops. Until his attacks on Rudd and Obama, he always had the option of cutting and running if voters turned against him on the issue, and Blair's troop reduction would have given him cover. If he does that now it looks like he has adopted Rudd's policy. Indeed, Howard finds himself pushed in the other direction: to sharpen the differences between himself and Rudd he announced more troops for Iraq late last month.

Howard's problem is not the distance between his position and Rudd's, but their similarity. Howard has 1400 defence personnel in Iraq. Rudd would withdraw 520 of them, those performing an "overwatch" mission in two peaceful provinces who reportedly have little to do. Howard has apparently refused US requests to move them to places where they would see more action, for fear of taking casualties.

You can see why Cheney may not mind if those 520 troops stay under Howard or go under Rudd. Australia's commitment to Iraq is nothing more than a symbol of political support for the Bush Administration, and from Washington's point of view 900 defence personnel is as good a symbol as 1400.

So what can Howard say that will revive Iraq as an electoral asset? He will recite the arguments used by Bush and Blair: that Iraq is a potential hotbed of global terrorism, that it is the central front in a global war between liberal values and fundamentalist obscurantism, that defeat in Iraq would be the first fatal step towards a global Islamic fundamentalist caliphate. But if he is sensible Howard will move over these arguments quickly, because none of them stands up to scrutiny.

He will dwell longer on three deeper arguments: that a coalition withdrawal would risk Iraq becoming even worse, would open the doors to Iranian hegemony in the Persian Gulf and would weaken the US as a global power. All are true and are the real reasons the US will not withdraw anytime soon. But they do not help Howard much, because they are all self-inflicted problems - products of the disastrous decision to invade.

The nub of Howard's political problem is that, like Rudd, he sees no quick exit but, unlike Rudd, he must bear responsibility for creating the problem by joining Bush's invasion four years ago. Which takes us back to where we began. On reflection, is a speech to mark this inauspicious anniversary such a good idea?

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