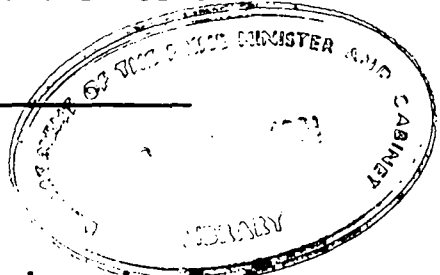


**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
CONCLUSION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE
ON AUSTRALIA'S SUPPORT FOR THE UNITED NATIONS ACTION IN THE
PERSIAN GULF
22 JANUARY 1991**



Mr Speaker,

The last two days of parliamentary debate have been of historic significance. This Parliament has exhaustively debated one of the most serious issues ever to come before it: the commitment of the Australian armed forces to support military action authorised by the United Nations in the Gulf.

I want at the outset to express my thanks to all those who have contributed to this debate, regardless of their party affiliation - a debate which has lasted more than twenty hours and has involved more than one hundred speakers. I realise that this has not been an easy issue for any of us to confront. For the first time in twenty years, Australian forces are committed to combat. It will be to the lasting credit of this Parliament that we have confronted and debated this issue with realism, patience and a shared concern for the best interests of the nation.

I am deeply gratified that this resolution will clearly be passed, and with an overwhelming majority.

In concluding this debate, I want to repeat my thanks to the Leader of the Opposition, the Leader of the National Party, and the other members of the Opposition who have expressed their support for Australia's current involvement in the Gulf.

It is vitally important, as we carry out our responsibilities in the Gulf, that we maintain the shared spirit of commitment to Australia's national interests that has characterised this debate.

It is important because we need to send a coherent and strong message to the world.

This message will fortify our serving personnel on board the Brisbane, the Sydney and the Success.

This message will encourage our allies in the United Nations coalition, including those who have already in this war lost men and materiel. In the morning I will be meeting with the heads of mission of all countries who are taking action in support of the UN resolutions on the Gulf and conveying to them the strength of this Parliament's support for those resolutions.

This message will, with its specific condemnation of Iraq's unprovoked attack on Israel, tell the people of Israel of this Parliament's sympathy with them at this time of crisis, and of our respect for the restraint which they have displayed over recent days.

This message will underline our concern that once this crisis is over there will be intensified efforts to establish peace and stability in the Middle East - including a just resolution of the Palestinian issue and the continuing security of Israel.

And it will underline - very clearly and decisively - the support of this Parliament for the resolute way this crisis has been handled by the United Nations, in defence of the principles of national sovereignty and collective security.

Mr Speaker,

It is also important that we send a clear message to the people of Australia.

Because as I said yesterday, it is important as we confront this crisis in Iraq that every Australian understand the facts of the situation.

The message we will be sending to the people of Australia, with the passage of this resolution, will be a message that regardless of the widespread and innate distaste we all feel for war - regardless of the hazards being undergone by our armed forces in the Gulf - we see support for this resolution as thoroughly and intrinsically consistent with our highest duties as the elected representatives of the people of Australia.

The allied nations did not want this war; we did not start this war. We tried hard to resolve the dispute by diplomacy. We have only with the greatest reluctance and deepest regret resorted to the military option.

And the majority of Australians understand the magnitude of Iraq's challenge to the world community and the importance of our campaign to meet and overcome that challenge.

Compassion and sorrow, including for the Iraqi people, are not the exclusive preserve of those who oppose the war but are shared by this Government and by all Australians.

It would, of course, be much easier if we could simply sit this out on the grounds that war is terrible.

But we Members of Parliament, least of all people, cannot abrogate our responsibilities and opt for the easy arguments with which some may feel more naturally comfortable. We owe it to ourselves and to our fellow citizens to examine with intellectual rigour this very complex situation.

Throughout the history of humankind, some have found it easier to go to war than others. And it has not always been true that those who found it easiest were necessarily the wisest. Let me say that I understand that those members who have said they cannot bring themselves to support this resolution have spoken from the heart. But this grave issue requires not just the heart but the head.

As previous speakers have acknowledged, the stakes in this conflict are very high, not only for Kuwait but for all countries, great and small, who may depend on a system of collective security for national survival.

If this system fails us now, at its first major test against aggression, the consequences for our security are disturbing indeed.

I might mention here my disappointment at the comments of some opponents of Australia's stance who, while previously stressing the importance of United Nations mechanisms involving international disputes, have now abandoned that approach at the very time the UN is proving to be an effective body.

Let me remind Honourable Members, as I did in my statement to this Parliament on 4 December, of Dr Evatt's prescient view about the obligations of nations in circumstances such as we face today. In 1945 he said:

'It must be made crystal clear that the nations seeking representation in the world's organisation must be prepared to contribute their share of physical force to restrain the action of proved aggressors.'

It was crystal clear in 1945, and it remains so today. This country did not question its truth then, nor should it now.

Mr Speaker,

Both the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the National Party made mention of the Government's White Paper on Defence and questioned its adequacy as a framework for Australia's policy in the light of the current crisis and its global dimensions.

On the contrary, the White Paper explicitly recognised that we may need to deploy forces far from Australia's shores, and ensured that the Australian Defence Forces would be able to meet that threat.

Paragraph 1.17 of the White Paper explicitly states, and I quote: 'Options will always be available to Australian governments for assistance to allies.... The type of Australian force structure required to protect our interests in our area of military interest entails substantial capabilities for operations further afield. For example, our guided missile frigates (FFGs) equipped with Seahawk

helicopters are capable of effective participation in a US carrier battle group well distant from Australia's shores.'

That is precisely what our ships are doing in the Gulf.

The fact that we were able to respond swiftly and appropriately to this present crisis in itself demonstrates, I believe, that our defence framework is right and appropriate to Australia's needs.

Mr Speaker,

This Government firmly believes that we have taken the right decision on behalf of the Australian people.

The news of each passing day confirms that belief. Most recently, we have been treated to the news that Saddam Hussein's abuses of international conventions have reached new depths with his threats to use allied prisoners of war in Iraq as human shields at strategic sites.

It is difficult to find words which adequately express our outrage at this latest development. Iraq's treatment of prisoners of war is in blatant breach of the Geneva Convention and is against natural human decency.

This parliamentary resolution is one way, an important way, in which we can demonstrate, as a nation, where we stand in this dispute with this dictator. It is a way of sending a signal to the world.

Mr Speaker,

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to those Australian men and women serving in our embassies in the region, especially those in Riyadh, Tel Aviv and Amman, and, until just before the fighting began, in Baghdad itself. In Riyadh and Tel Aviv, of course, our staff have been hearing the missiles fall.

At considerable risk to their own safety, these staff have been working throughout the conflict to try to ensure the safety of fellow Australians who remain in the region. I am sure that all members of this Parliament join me in acknowledging their courage and professionalism.

Mr Speaker,

The 1990s began with the highest of hopes - that peace would be given a chance; that former superpower rivalries and tensions would give way to a new world order of co-operation among nations, one in which ordinary men and women could get on with their lives and enjoy the fruits which a peaceful world can bring.

Saddam Hussein's great crime is that he is destroying these hopes. If he is not stopped, the decade, the twentieth

century, will end in hopes darkened and aggression again triumphant.

Young Australian defence personnel are in the Gulf to stop this happening. It is important that they know that this Parliament and the overwhelming majority of the Australian population are fully behind them.

By supporting this resolution today, members of this Parliament will, on behalf of all Australians, demonstrate their understanding and support for the task these Australians are to perform.

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