

Predictable Outcomes: Australia, the National Security Committee, and Invading Iraq

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Archivists can be a dull if industrious lot. Christmas crackers are less important than the new year announcement in Canberra, when the National Archives of Australia releases documents like the newborn into the information world. The event is not without irony, given that such documents are often aged and seasoned numbers, whiskered by storage and grey with cataloguing.

On January 1, the NAA diligently followed a long standing convention of [releasing a stash of cabinet documents](#) running into 240 from the Howard government, a period in Australian history when finance ruled with raffish vulgarity, and critical adventurers of conscience were anaesthetised and told to get a mortgage. **John Howard**, Australia's dull, waxwork prime minister, reminded his voters that Australia's links to Asian countries were less important than the sigh-heavy attention from Washington.

What was particularly interesting in this disgorging of material was the focus on Australia's foolish, negligent and even criminal contribution to the war on Iraq in 2003. Even more interesting was how little the files said about the reasons for Australia's commitment to the invasion. Much of this was occasioned by the omission of 78 records that would otherwise have been in the original 2020 transfer to the archives.

Canberra is the city of smudged politicians, unnervingly clean air and endless meetings, but the omission of documents troubled Australia's Prime Minister, **Anthony Albanese**, given that they were concerned with the invasion. He even went so far as to order an inquiry. In true capital fashion, it was done with reserve and caution, the broom being of the "one of us" school. **Dennis Richardson**, former director of the Australian Secret Intelligence

Organisation (ASIO) and former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), not to mention being on the government's [retainer as a consultant](#), became the broom in question.

In subsequent [recommendations](#) as to why the omission of the documents had taken place, Richardson advanced the less than controversial thesis that the NAA include documents from the National Security Committee (NSC), a fixture of the Howard government.

On March 14, the Archives, as if prodded, [released](#) certain NSC documents relevant to the Iraq invasion. In the incomplete release, Australia as empire's obedient, perfumed appendage becomes almost ridiculously evident. On January 10, 2003, the **Defence Minister Robert Hill**, along with the defence force chief, [identified the need](#) for deploying some personnel from the Australian Defence Force within a month "on the likely time-frame for possible military action against Iraq" as indicated by US Central Command. The meeting also reveals that ADF forward units were already designated from a list agreed upon by the NSC on August 26 and December 4, 2002. The thrill for imminent war was palpable.

Howard, at the same meeting, promised that committing ADF forces required the consideration of all cabinet members, also noting that he had "foreshadowed to the governor-general the general direction of steps under consideration by the government in relation to Iraq". But the governor-general of the time, the eventually doomed Peter Hollingworth, was subsequently told by the prime minister that involving him in the decision to invade Iraq was needless; the ADF could be deployed under the provisions of the *Defence Act*.

A minute dated March 18, 2003 [makes mention](#) of the full cabinet's authorisation of the invasion, though hardly anything else. There is, however, a submission from the defence minister "circulated in the cabinet room on 17 and 18 March" intended to convince cabinet on possible military operations in Iraq. In anticipation of a formal request to commit troops, the ADF had already been authorised to pursue "prudent contingency planning" on the matter. The two stated war aims of Washington are outlined (vassal, take note): "regime change" and crippling Iraq's "delivery of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)". On this point, the Howard government dawdles, if ever so slightly, notably on the issue of regime change, admitting, ultimately, that "this may be a desirable, even inevitable, outcome of military action".

The now infamous memorandum of advice authored by the first assistant secretaries of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Attorney-General's department is also to be found. The memorandum offers the shakiest of justifications for invading Iraq, also drawing from unsubstantiated reasons from their UK counterparts. It was [subsequently and rightly excoriated](#) by an irate Gavan Griffith, the then unconsulted Solicitor-General. Not only were both bits of legal advice "entirely untenable", they were also "arrant nonsense", furnishing "no threads for military clothes." Nothing from President George W. Bush's remarks had revealed any desire "to clothe American action with the authority of the Security Council." Thuggish unilateral action seemed the order of the day.

For Griffith, certain omissions were almost unpardonable. What, for instance, of such authorities as Canberra's veteran authority, Henry Burmester, the former head of the Office of International Law, subsequently appointed Chief Counsel of the AG's department. Or for, that matter, of the now late James Crawford of Cambridge University, commonly retained for the giving of advice on international law. Cautious experience had been elbowed out in

favour of the gun.

The latest documents from the NSC are more sleet than snow. They do confirm that the parliamentary system, more than ever, should be involved in reining in the wild impulses of war makers. In the meantime, drawing up an indictment for Howard to stand trial in the International Criminal Court is overdue. The same goes for a number of his cabinet. We would not want them to go stale before justice.

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Featured image: An SAS patrol occupies a low-lying position to remain undetected by passing Iraqis. Patrols observing enemy movements could quickly call on the support of these vehicles if required. (Licensed under Fair Use)

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