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Bridges of Goodwill - Reminiscences

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Bridges of Goodwill - Reminiscences

Abstract

The following is the text of a talk delivered to the South Coast Branch (Thirroul) of Union Aid Abroad on 4 August 2007. Tom Uren AO was born on 28 May 1921. His early life involved playing rugby league for Manly Warringah and a stint at professional boxing before going to war between 1939–45. In the early 1950s he joined the Australian Labor Party and was the Federal Member for Reid, in western Sydney, between 1958–1990. He was Minister for Urban and Regional Development in the Whitlam government from 1972 to 1975, responsible for setting up the Australian Heritage Commission and the National Estate and creating new national parks. He held the portfolios of local government and administrative services in the Hawke government from 1984 to 1987 and was a leading member of the ALP Left during his time in parliament. He was often referred to as ‘the conscience of Parliament’ and remains a strong advocate for world peace and the environment.

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The following is the text of a talk delivered to the South Coast Branch (Thirroul) of Union Aid Abroad on 4 August 2007. Tom Uren AO was born on 28 May 1921. His early life involved playing rugby league for Manly Warringah and a stint at professional boxing before going to war between 1939–45. In the early 1950s he joined the Australian Labor Party and was the Federal Member for Reid, in western Sydney, between 1958–1990. He was Minister for Urban and Regional Development in the Whitlam government from 1972 to 1975, responsible for setting up the Australian Heritage Commission and the National Estate and creating new national parks. He held the portfolios of local government and administrative services in the Hawke government from 1984 to 1987 and was a leading member of the ALP Left during his time in parliament. He was often referred to as ‘the conscience of Parliament’ and remains a strong advocate for world peace and the environment.

I am pleased that I was invited to be here with you tonight, and I commend your organisation in building bridges of goodwill with workers in countries less fortunate than ours. Let me restate a brief quote I made in Melbourne in 1990, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of May Day: ‘Humanity which we love so much—I know many of you are fearful of using that word “love”—but our struggle is a commitment of love of our fellow humans. It inspired our people in their early struggle against oppression and exploitation’.

I am proud that your organisation has similar ideals. Peter Jennings said to me in his letter: ‘We are the overseas aid arm of the Australian Trade Union Movement. With the support of Australian unions and many individual union members we assist vocational skills training of men and women workers in developing countries as well as strengthening their trade union so that any job they get will be a decent job—paying just wages with reasonable conditions and safety standards’. So I am here in solidarity with all those ideals.

I was elected to the federal parliament by the Australian people 49 years ago. I have always tried to meet the ideals that Peter set out in his letter. I have written two books on my life - *Straight Left*, published in 1994/1995 and gone into four prints, and more recently I co-authored a book, *The Fight: a portrait of a Labor man who never grew up*, with Martin Flanagan, whose father served with me on the Burma/Thai Railway during the war. Excuse me for talking about the evolutionary development of my life, but my war experience had a great influence on me.

There are many people and experiences that have nurtured my life. But my experience serving under Weary Dunlop has had a lifelong and lasting experience on me. We were at a place called Hintock Road Camp or, as Weary called it, Hintock "Mountain" Camp. "Weary" is a name of respect. He would tax our officers and medical orderlies and the men who went out to work would be paid a small wage. We would contribute most of it into a central fund. Weary would then send some of our people out into the jungle to trade with the Thai and Chinese traders for food and drugs for our sick and needy. In our camp the strong looked after the weak; the young looked after the old; the fit looked after the sick. We collectivised a great proportion of our income.

Just as the wet season set in a group of about 400 British camped near us for shelter. They had tents. The officers took the best tents, the NCOs the next best and the ordinary soldiers got the dregs. Within six weeks only about 50 of them marched out—the rest died of dysentery or cholera. In the mornings when we would walk out to work, their corpses would be lying in the mud as we passed them. Only a creek separated our two camps. On the one side the survival of the fittest - the law of the jungle - prevailed, and on the other side the collective spirit under Weary Dunlop. That spirit has always remained with me. Our book *The Fight* is a message of hope. It doesn't deal with personalities - it is more directed towards philosophy and looking towards a positive future. Among my contributions I wrote an essay entitled 'Let's look to the future'.

I have served the Labor Party, the Labour Movement and our Australian people for over 50 years. I have faith in our tomorrows. We have some remarkable young federal members of parliament, particularly the young women of our movement. What has worried me for a number of years from both sides of politics is the lack of compassion and commitment for ordinary people. Governments fail to give public leadership and commit themselves to the long term planning of our country and our planet. No federal government since the Whitlam government has

made a major financial commitment to our states to strengthen and enhance the social and physical infrastructure of our major cities and regions. Yet each year the federal government determines the net immigration intake into our country. They then leave it to the states, local governments and the market to cope with the population intake.

On our environment, the Howard government's failure to ratify the Kyoto Agreement was a grave mistake, considering the world climate change situation, the greenhouse effect and the water and soil problems in Australia. The Murray-Darling catchment, which affects the three eastern states and South Australia, is a region which is the food basket for our people but also for millions of people on our planet. In my view, it is a greater priority than our defence program. I have always supported a rational defence program, but this issue surpasses that commitment. On the protection of our native forests, we should cease issuing wood chipping export licences and progressively phase out existing ones. I advocate the creation of an Independent Environment Authority which should have the independence of the Reserve Bank and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

In regards to defence—Australia's policy should be orientated to our region. We should not be in Iraq and Afghanistan. We should be committed to the Asian and Pacific Region. North Korea is a greater problem for us than Iraq; particularly the problems it creates with Japan. I want to make some comments on Iraq and an experience I had in Sydney on 16 February 2003. It was an anti Iraq war rally in Hyde Park. What affected me was the patience and tolerance of those still waiting to march. Many could not hear what the speakers were saying. They were there to oppose violence. They were opposed to war being a solution to international conflict and the killing of ordinary people. They knew that over half of Iraq's population is under 15 years of age. I am sure what occurred in Sydney was not only duplicated in other Australian cities, but also in cities and towns around the world. We who marched knew John Howard or George Bush would not heed our message, but some of the nations in the United Nations Security Council may have been influenced by ordinary people's commitment against war in Iraq. Of course Bush and Howard did ignore our demonstrations - not only ours but those throughout the world. But the United Nations Security Council refused to authorise a motion which would allow military action to be taken to invade Iraq. In the words of Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations, "it is an illegal war".

In my view the United States invasion of Iraq is the most disastrous and tragic foreign policy decision made by an American Government since the end of World War II. They ignored wiser counsel, even from within their own conservative ranks in the United States, and even within the Republican Party. I wrote letters both before and after the invasion. Some were published in *The Australian*. I predicted that Iraq will become a quagmire. What an understatement that has turned out to be! As a member of the Coalition of the Willing in the military invasion of Iraq, the Howard Government should share the responsibility of the chaos that has been created in Iraq. Since that invasion, over 700,000 Iraqi civilians have perished, four million Iraqis have been displaced, including two million refugees. Over 3,600 United States forces have been killed and more than 48,000 have been wounded since the invasion of 19 March 2003. I haven't included the British death and casualty figures as well as those of the other nations involved. Australia, by good fortune or good luck, has lost very few. To date the cost financially to Australia is \$1,650 million.

Ultimately the Shiites will be the victors if Iraq remains a single country. They represent over 60 per cent of the population of Iraq, and that is only if the so called democratic elections are held. There are some elements in the United States who believe that Iraq should become three countries. The Kurds control the north (which is oil rich), the Shiites in the South (which is also oil rich) and the Sunnies based around Baghdad (but have no known oil resources). We will need good, experienced diplomacy to avoid wider conflict. We will need to evolve a greater tolerance and understanding to work with the dominating forces in Iraq and Iran. Through the so call democratic elections they will control, and exert influence over, the region which possesses the greatest oil reserves on our planet. One thing I am sure of: violence and military conflict will not solve our problems. I am also sure there are many Australian people who resent involving us in an illegal war and Howard going all the way with George W. Bush.

In conclusion, in September 2005 I was speaking to a group of young Japanese at Macquarie University in Sydney. During the period of dialogue, one young Japanese student asked "Mr Uren, what is your philosophy?" I quoted the principles I lived by during my parliamentary life. When I returned home I set it out on paper, as follows.

Tom Uren's Philosophy

- The strong should look after the weak.
- The young look after the not so young.
- The fit look after the sick.
- We should collectivise a substantial portion of our income to help protect our sick, needy and our people.
- We need to seek a more tolerant world.
- We should defend human and civil rights, wherever they are violated.
- Oppose violence, on a personal, national and international level.
- Oppose war as a solution to international problems.
- Protect, enhance and rehabilitate our environment. If we destroy it we are destroying a part of ourselves.
- Recognise we are inter-related to one another. Australians should recognise we are a part of our planet.
- Why is it that in times of crisis we need each other?
- Why in normal times can't we be more collective?
- We should build friendship and understanding between people and nations.