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Latham had it right

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Latham had it right

WHILE Tony Blair's war on civil liberties has been checked by the British Parliament, Labor in Australia fails to challenge the threat to democracy which the terrorism legislation represents.

Instead, Kim Beazley is happy to declare that Labor is with Mr Howard in "the war on terror".

That is somewhat remarkable, given that Mr Howard sees the invasion of Iraq as part of "the war on terror".

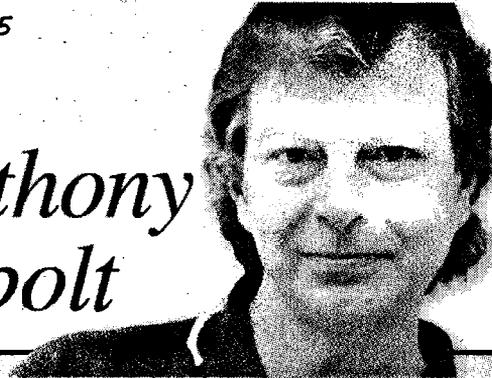
The invasion, of course, unleashed acts of terror and facilitated the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq. Indeed, the existing disaster that is Iraq constitutes a classic example of "blow back", whereby the imperial project helps create forces which, through terrorist actions, strike at the heart of empire itself.

September 11 was "blow back", as were Bali, Madrid and London. Bluntly, there is no war on terror. You cannot, as Gore Vidal argued, wage war on an abstract noun. Afghani and Iraqi citizens have been slaughtered in the name of this concocted war. The American international relations expert Richard Barnett made an acute observation a few years before September 11: for a terrorist group with one consuming passion, violence is an effective weapon because the panic it can create serve the group's goals.

But a state, however heavily armed, is at a disadvantage when it lashes out violently in response. Air strikes and economic sanctions are blunt instruments that neither punish the planners and perpetrators of terrorist acts, who know how to

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fade into the night, nor discourage further violence.

Both are far more likely to hurt innocent people and fuel murderous rage against governments reacting in such a manner.

Australia's participation in the invasion of Iraq (added to our involvement in the earlier Gulf War) has made it a likely target of terrorists. Yet instead of responding rationally to a potential terrorist threat, the Australian Government and Opposition want to throw out cherished civil liberties, undermine standard legal procedures, tear up the democratic social contract.

The proposed laws against sedition are simply sinister. At the height of the American War in Vietnam, in which we participated like the loyal lap dogs we are, I wore a National Liberation Front badge alongside my moratorium badge.

Yes, I supported the enemy because they were fighting for national liberation and against an imperial invading force.

So, too, I belonged to the South

African Liberation Centre which supported the African National Congress which was then seen as a terrorist group. Under the proposed laws, I could be jailed for sedition. Indeed, theoretically I could be jailed for doing much less and that is why those in the artistic community are quite right to voice concern.

The Government is using this legislation in a very cynical fashion, whipping up fear and loathing even as it proclaims loudly that this is not directed against the Islamic community.

In one sense, the Government is right - it is directed against everyone.

Yet it has specific resonance within the Islamic community. What could possibly be wrong with strengthening police and security agency powers? Plenty, as evidenced by the tragic killing of the Brazilian man in the London underground.

Create a climate of fear, jack up the tension, boost national security and you will get many such instances, as well as many unjust detentions (as is already happening in Britain and may,

for all we know, be happening here). Those with historical memories will recall a number of times when national security has been used as a political tool to bolster the fortunes of government.

When there is no effective Opposition this further entrenches government pride and power.

Moreover, it fuels the hysteria which can exist in national security agencies like ASIO and ASIS whose records are at best patchy and at worst laughable.

Just wait for that knock at the door in the middle of the night.

Then cast your mind back to a time when the Labor Party actually stood for civil liberties and against arbitrary government and police power.

How, then, do we combat terror?

First, terrorism will not be eliminated even under draconian national security laws. The case of Ireland proves that.

We can act to reduce terrorism but only by reversing the very policies which give rise to it, such as continued American occupation of Arab land and the failure to address properly the cause of justice for the Palestinians.

Mark Latham was pilloried for saying the troops in Iraq should be brought home by Christmas.

Yet that simple action would have done more to reduce the likelihood of terrorist attacks than any amount of Government legislation.

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