

WAR of WORDS

To many, the rights or wrongs of the Gulf War seemed a straightforward issue. To others, the war was fraught with moral dilemmas. ALR brought together federal Minister for Administrative Services Nick Bolkus and Democrats' leader Janet Powell to debate the issues. The discussion was conducted in Canberra in February

Senator Powell, do you think there is a role for force in international affairs?

JANET: Yes, and the position I've taken on the Gulf War doesn't rule that out. This is a decision about this particular issue and this particular situation at this particular time.

So why wasn't force appropriate at this particular time?

JANET: We supported the original UN resolution condemning Saddam Hussein for annexing Kuwait and calling on him to pull out. We understood in supporting that that the sanctions regime was not going to be a short-term solution, that it would take time. And we believed that the UN monitoring committee that was set up under that resolution was the appropriate body to make further suggestions as far as the maintenance of sanctions was concerned. We also always understood that the diplomacy aspect of the sanctions was something which, although it would begin at the same time as the sanctions, could not be expected to bite in the short term.

In terms of time frames, international expert opinion would always have suggested to us at least a year, if not

longer - particularly as the resources of Kuwait were still available to the Iraqis after the invasion had taken place. We believed this wasn't a position which should be made politically, but on the basis of the diplomatic and expert advice about the sanctions. We saw the war decision as being made very early, and sanctions as not being properly supported by the international community, and particularly not by the US.

Senator Bolkus, why do you think force had to be used on 16 January?

NICK: I think the first point is that armed struggle is not alien to the Left in Australia: this is something I've said consistently. So you've got to decide whether in these circumstances the use of arms is justified. I'm one of those who felt that sanctions were not going to work in this particular instance, and I think the date set by the UN recognised that they would have to work within a certain period. Not in terms crippling Saddam Hussein and his military strength, but in terms of putting pressure on him internationally to step back. I think in this instance we were faced at the end of last year with a number of reasons why sanctions were not going to be effective. One: sanctions



gave Saddam time, and that gave him the ability to strengthen his armoury in terms of possibly nuclear and certainly other weapons. That was very much within his capacity. Two: we have always misread - and I think Janet misreads - the Middle East situation, and the people of the Middle East. They love to suffer for their politics. Sanctions on Iraq would have meant that in 12 months' time the people there would have perhaps been hungrier, but also more resolved and more bitter and more resolute. Particularly given the information they would be receiving on which to base their views.

So, firstly, he could strengthen his armoury; secondly, sanctions could simply have stiffened resolve. Thirdly, over time the alliance would have become more fragile. Saddam would have found—as he had found in the past—people to supply him and re-equip him. I think after 12 months you would have found Saddam, given more time, in a stronger position. At the end of which you would have found that the will of the world community could not be implemented without greater bloodshed. What would Janet do in 12 months' time to implement the UN resolutions against a stronger foe with a more brittle alliance.

JANET: I'd first challenge the assumption that he would be stronger. I'm not surprised that you make that assumption as a person who avowedly continues to believe that sanctions wouldn't work. It's that mindset that's led us into this. It seems to me totally unsupportable to suggest that sanctions universally applied and supported over a period of time could not lead to a situation in which a nation such as Iraq could strengthen itself, in terms of arms and its ability to wage war. Let's not forget Hussein's massive capacity has been brought in; he's been sold it by those who now see him as the enemy. He doesn't have the military-industrial complex that the German nation, for instance, had in the 30s and 40s. It's quite a different situation. If sanctions had been tried, it is the sort of nation where the first thing to dry up would be the industrial, and certain of the military, capacity.

Whether or not there was sufficient technological and scientific capacity to develop the nuclear option is something that's never been proven. In fact, there's a great deal of international opinion that it is at least three to five years away, in spite of George Bush saying he could have it in 12 months.

NICK: We've always known that once you have the fuel then it doesn't take that much to develop a bomb; that's been one of the arguments we've used to oppose the mining of uranium. I don't think we can take that position and then say he's five years off doing it. Saddam has been close to it for some time. His capacity in chemical and biological warfare is frightening, and with those sorts of resources you don't need much of a trigger.

JANET: When you use that as a justification for this war and you claim to be fighting it under Resolution 678 then you've got a problem, because that resolution says get him

Janet: "One of the things that's been forgotten is the usurping of the UN's role."

out of Kuwait full stop. Now if you're saying there's still this nuclear capacity which we genuinely believe could turn into a bomb in 12 months, this war is doing nothing about it.

Do you think the option is beyond just getting out of Kuwait, extending to destruction of Iraq's capacity? Do you see that as one of the objectives?

NICK: I think the objective of the Left in the federal parliamentary party is adherence to Resolution 678 and other resolutions. For instance, we have Resolution 660, which calls for the removal of Iraq's troops to where they were on 1 August. And this then goes back to some of the things that concern me about the war. The authority of the UN is important in all this. To me it can't implement its resolutions — and there's been a dozen of them — in this particular circumstance, when you've got most of the countries of the world supporting them and over 40 countries involved in the Gulf. If they can't do that, then you can write off two things: any chance of implementing resolutions in the future and secondly of involvement in future issues like Cambodia or the Middle East. I'm not saying we'll get a new world order out of this particular situation but unless the UN can have some authority — can come out on top — then you won't be able to get a resolution on the Middle East. In amongst that I think there's got to be a recognition of the amorality of arms dealers, and how they supply the region has to be addressed. You have to look at the reduction of conventional and other arms to that region. The only way you can do that is through the UN.

It has had some major successes in the reduction of nuclear capacity; we've got to move on the conventional.

Does failure to take military action undermine the UN?

JANET: This is where we disagree. The premise that the important factor in all this is the authority of the UN is one that we share; it's just a question of how you view what's happened. One of the things that's been conveniently forgotten is the usurping — and I put as strongly as that — of the UN's role, power and future began very early in the piece with the movement of military machinery before the UN called for it. It was not the kind of machinery to police the sanctions or [to act] as a containment force.

It was at that stage that I began to object to the process and I still do. I think there is evidence all the way that the subsequent motions, in particular 678, were responsive. The free vote that the first two resolutions represent — 660 and 661 — was no longer in operation.

NICK: You've got so many countries in the world. You and I start from the same premise in terms of international politics — and I have probably been accused of being more anti-American than most people in the parliament — but there is an up side and a down side for the States in all this. You're saying they've driven it too hard and too fast; I'll say some of those countries you can't drive. France, Italy, Spain, countries of the non-aligned movement, Arab countries and so on. Some of them got leverage out of it, but others have been stubbornly independent and taken their own line. Now they've all come to a position with us and the US to say that the Security Council resolutions have been overwhelmingly endorsed in an unprecedented way. I missed out the USSR. But the trap now for the US is that having played such a dominant role their

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authority still has to rely on world opinion, other countries to go along with it. The USSR's peace initiative is an indication that the US can't control the agenda.

JANET: The United States moved quite visibly, quite openly and quite out of proportion to what was necessary in terms of policing or containment and set up this loss-of-

face situation which now exists on both sides and which made it inevitable that armed conflict would break out.

NICK: Let's acknowledge that it's post-Cold War and the UN has an emerging role to play and should be playing it. So in this particular instance the progression of resolution—intensifying the degree of commitment to doing something about this—should not be ignored or written off as a US resolution.

JANET: They got more and more watered down. If we're talking about resolutions, 678 is an interpretable resolution and that is the clearest evidence of the change between 660/661 and 678. The rest are just urging. But it's couched in language which is open to interpretation.

NICK: But it's been interpreted by 40 countries that are actively involved and interpreted by another hundred as endorsing the action. Let's not ignore that or isolate ourselves in an anti-American position.

JANET: The UN resolution process has been propelled by what I presume to be a pre-emptive and overarching military push by the United States to where you end up having a face-saving problem. On the one side Perez de Cuellar has told us of not understanding the psyche of people in that area, and on the other side, the coalition side, the claim that if we didn't proceed we were rewarding Hussein. That was set up on both sides. In the first place not to go to armed conflict [was difficult] and now [it is] very difficult to extricate the coalition from. I don't believe that a great deal of the decision-making that you're saying is universal or unanimous is really pushed forward by the same sort of longer-term approach which was evident in 660 and 661. It's become a much more short term exercise and a much more self-interested exercise than it was back then, and it was generated by the very early decision by the United States for it to be a military conflict.

NICK: I take the view that the hypocrisy of others shouldn't dictate the way we go. To be consistent with our past beliefs and what we'll want to do when there's an incursion on the autonomy of nations and people, armed struggle is within our capacity and has been recognised as such from the opening days of the United Nations. In this particular instance I think some people under-estimate Hussein and the capacity he has. I don't think sanctions could work. It is important out of all of this to have a full agenda which places in the UN as a body of authority the role to resolve international conflict and which addresses the Middle East situation—in terms of disputes and supply of arms—and which leads to peace, a just and stable one.

You then believe that in the event of some other country invading a small neighbour, equivalent force would be used again to retain the status quo.

NICK: It's all relative. I'm one of those who for years argued against Indonesian activities in East Timor and part of the Left which adopted a position on, say, the Philippines or Fiji. I think what we need in the future is a mechanism whereby the UN has the capacity to resolve conflict. Force,

UN GULF RESOLUTIONS

Resolution 660 (2 August): demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

Resolution 661 (6 August): imposes a trade, financial and military blockade on Iraq, exempting only medicine and food for humanitarian purposes.

Resolution 662 (9 August): declares Iraq's annexation of Kuwait null and void.

Resolution 664 (18 August): demands that all foreign nationals be allowed to leave Iraq and Kuwait immediately.

Resolution 665 (25 August): authorises the use of limited naval force to secure the economic blockade of Iraq.

Resolution 666 (13 September): approves the despatch of food to Iraq under Red Cross supervision.

Resolution 667 (16 September): condemns Iraqi raids on foreign diplomatic missions in Kuwait.

Resolution 669 (24 September): asks sanctions committee to examine aid requests from countries affected by the sanctions on Iraq.

Resolution 670 (25 September): imposes air embargo on Iraq and quarantines any Iraqi ship in foreign ports.

Resolution 674 (29 October): condemns the actions of Iraqi occupying forces in Kuwait: in-principle agreement to compensate countries affected by the sanctions.

- Source: Agence France Presse.

though distasteful and for last resort, has been—and will continue to be—recognised as legitimate.

JANET: In this case I'm arguing that it was not the last resort, that we hadn't reached that stage. I don't disagree that the UN within its charter can use force but to me the new world order should rest, and I believe we had the opportunity to make it rest, on very much a last resort for force, a bringing together of the nations of the world looking at alternative means for resolution of these conflicts. I really despair for the future; if next time we're not going to give it a much better opportunity than we did in the Middle East.

NICK: I think the challenge for the Left is to get out of the rhetoric of the Cold War, to acknowledge that the international arena's changed in the last few years and that we have to address it in a much more sophisticated and non-knee jerk way than we have in the past and to do what we've always believed in. That is to use the mechanism of the United Nations and other more sophisticated things like treaties on reductions in conventional arms and apply those concepts as far as we can and in particular in this region.