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MARGINS

Is Peace Enough?

The debate on the Gulf War has so far been characterised by a high degree of certainty and self-righteousness on all sides. Both pro- and anti-war campaigners seem sure that they have the 'solution' to the crisis. For those on the extra-parliamentary Left, who form the bulk of the active anti-war protestors, recent history suggests that they of all people should be wary of trying to appear omniscient. If they learned only one thing from the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, it should surely have been that the Left does not have all the answers to the world's problems.

The anti-war protestors' insistence that they are acting strictly according to the highest principles is dubious. While the US is rightly lambasted for its cynicism in supporting Saddam during the Iran-Iraq war, few on the Left have seen fit to criticise the brutal, reactionary and undemocratic regimes which dominate the Arab world. Nor have the anti-war campaigners done much more than pay lip-service to the idea that Iraq is the principal aggressor in the war. Where have been the protests outside the Iraqi consulate?

That the protests have so far concentrated on 'US imperialism' is not a surprise. There certainly is a compelling case to be made against American policy in the Gulf. However, it is the knee-jerk reaction against Israel which shows how little thought has gone into the politi-

cal objectives of the demonstrations. Of course, the Gulf War is 'linked' to the Palestinian issue, because the West's glaring double standards on UN resolutions condemning Israel have given Saddam the opportunity to present himself as the avenger of the Palestinians.

What, however, is the message of an 'anti-war' protest outside the Israeli consulate in Sydney? At a time when Israel's only direct part in the war has been to suffer repeated attacks from Iraqi missiles, the only conclusion one could draw is that the protestors deny Israel's right to respond to such attacks. This is tantamount to denying Israel's right to exist, something which even the PLO has until recently conceded.

This is an attitude warped by years of commitment - and commendable commitment - to the cause of the Palestinians. Support for the ANC, the PLO and the Sandinistas has become the litmus test of Left credibility in the same way that defending Stalin was in the 1930s, and the result has been a similar ossification of Left positions.

When the true nature of Stalinism and then Brezhnevism became apparent to everyone, most left-wing groups in the West quietly forgot about Eastern Europe, or tried somewhat sheepishly to point to the supposed 'achievements' of East Germany or Czechoslovakia. The same tunnel vision and lack of self-criticism are evident in a response to the Gulf which is capable of dismissing or ignoring the atrocities committed against their own people by the governments of Syria, Iraq and others.

In truth, it's only for genuine pacifists that the Gulf issue is clear-cut. Most of the anti-war protestors are not pacifists, however. While they are revolted by what war means, and rightly sceptical of the benefits of pursuing this one, few would deny the right of the ANC, or other guerrilla groups to armed struggle. This majority of non-pacifists has largely failed to come up with any response to the war

beyond 'US Out of the Gulf' and 'Bring The Frigates Home'.

It's not clear who, if anyone, would be left to pursue the alternative, 'peaceful' policy of enforcing sanctions on Iraq, if these demands were to be unexpectedly met. In effect such a position implies that in future the world will simply have to accept actions like the invasion of Kuwait, because war and 'US imperialism' are always greater evils.

Nor is it good enough simply to point to the mistakes made before 2 August. It is certainly true that the war is the immediate result of spectacular foreign policy failures on the part of the West. Nevertheless, crises such as this are bound to occur again. And withdrawal by the US from its current position of power over many parts of the world would not necessarily make regional conflicts any less likely.

There is a dire need for a more sophisticated approach to international tensions, and an escape from the crude politics of opposition. Where, to take one example, is any new analysis from the Left of the way in which the UN should intervene in future disputes? The shrill cry of 'Bring The Frigates Home' suggests not only an unwillingness to address the unpleasant nitty-gritty issue of how to get Saddam out of Kuwait, but also an isolationism which denies that Australia should have any engagement with the rest of the world, UN resolutions notwithstanding.

The demonstrations against the war are honourable and, I personally believe, right in seeing war as an unacceptable solution, or no solution at all to the present crisis. But if the political ideas behind them remain naive and complacent, the Left is condemning itself to remain on the outer fringes of Australian politics for the foreseeable future.

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