



United We Stand

For Bob Howard, there's no serious alternative to collective security, with all that implies.

Statements by Labor members during the Gulf debate in federal parliament indicate that the 'UN factor'—that the allied action was endorsed by the UN—was an important element in mobilising and holding support within Labor's parliamentary ranks both for the war and for Australia's Gulf commitment. Few should be surprised by this. In emphasising the 'UN factor', Labor members were drawing on sentiment deeply embedded in ALP thinking on foreign policy. The ALP platform details at some length the party's strong commitment to the aims and work of the UN. It is part of ALP folklore that one of the party's 'greats', Dr Evatt, played an important role in negotiations leading to the establishment of the UN and, in recognition of this, became the first president of the UN General Assembly.

What is surprising is that some Labor members were not moved by the UN argument. (Shortly after the initial commitment of Australian naval vessels in the early days of the crisis, some members of the parliamentary Left protested that they could only support Australian involvement if it was part of a UN endorsed action. But this undertaking did not hold, following a string of UN Security Council resolutions endorsing action against Iraq.) Moreover, it would appear that disenchantment with the UN on this issue is even more widespread in the Left outside of parliament. This indicates an important development in Left thinking on international security issues and is worthy of examination.

Rationalisations for the Left's disenchantment abound. Many have argued that the allied force in the Gulf, though acting with the sanction of the UN, is not a UN force as such, as Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar keeps reminding us, the allied forces are not under the control of the Military Staff Committee of the Security Council and the blue helmets and flags of the UN are nowhere in evidence. Also, many are no doubt offended by what they see as US domination and manipulation of the Security Council and

are troubled by the apparent double standards of the world body—its eagerness to take action against Iraq, but not against Israel, Indonesia, the US, and so on.

These are powerful arguments and are worthy of close consideration. But my purpose here is to look at something else—to examine the Left's attitude to the UN role in the Gulf, the implications for Left thinking on international security issues.

To many on the Left, the UN has long had a benign image; to the extent to which they have thought about the world body at all it has usually been with regard to issues such as the decolonisation process, the promotion and monitoring of human rights, the work of UNESCO, famine and disaster relief, global and environment programs, and the resettlement of refugees. Any acknowledgement that the UN has had a security role to play—that it has actually used armed force—has been softened by the perception that this has usually been for 'peace-keeping' purposes. Underpinning all this are understandable feelings of revulsion towards war and to the idea that armed conflict is an acceptable means of resolving international disputes. Many on the Left clearly regard the use of massive armed forces in the name of the UN as doubly offensive. It would make little difference to these folk if the allied operation in the Gulf was under the control of the Military Staff Committee of the Security Council. There would still be objections to the Security Council taking military action in support of its resolutions. The revulsion would remain.

This scepticism about the UN's role in the Gulf represents a significant development in Left-liberal thinking about international security. Collective security—the principle of 'all against one', the entire world against the aggressor—was a central feature of the League of Nations created after World War One. When the UN was created from the ashes of World War Two there was the view that the world had suffered dearly because of its appeasement of aggression. The aim was that the great powers, acting collectively through the Security Council, would be sufficient to overwhelm would-be aggressors and save future generations from the 'scourge of war'.

It is important to emphasise that these ideas were far from unacceptable to a whole generation of leftwingers. Many,



like Australia's Dr Evatt, must have felt uneasy about the authority accorded the great powers in the new world body (Britain, France, China, the USA and the USSR were made permanent members of the Security Council and each accorded the veto). But all this must have seemed a small price to pay for an arrangement that held out the promise of a peaceful future. It was recognised that aggression was a problem in world politics, that something needed to be done about it, and that collective security was preferable to the alternatives. This approach to what might be termed the international security problem was something the Left was able to live with.

The political tensions of the Cold War, dating from about 1949, largely crippled the UN in the exercise of its security function. But the end of the Cold War changed all that. The string of resolutions adopted by the Council since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait represents an unprecedented display of consensus in the world body. For the first time, the Council has undertaken an act of enforcement within the full meaning of the expression and of the UN Charter's provisions. (Because the Soviet Union was temporarily boycotting the Security Council and hence did not participate in the decision in 1950 to support South Korea, the UN's action then cannot be said to have involved collective security within the full meaning of the Charter.)

The real significance of the current controversy about the UN's role in the Gulf is that, on the occasion of the Council's first exercise of its security function within the full meaning of the Charter, large sections of the Left have questioned the legitimacy of the UN to act in this way.

This raises the question of what the Left might now regard as a proper and legitimate response to international security problems. The question is an important one, not least because the problem of international security will not go away. In the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War there was perhaps the view that, at long last, we might be entering a period of peace. But it would be foolish to assume this is the case. Factors which in the past have been causes of conflict are abundant in our contemporary world: irredentist causes; ethnic and nationalist rivalries; religious fervour; injustice and denial of human rights; competition

for resources; weapons proliferation and militarism; legitimate national security concerns; great power chauvinism; and gross inequality between nations and regions.

The Left has a responsibility to address itself to the international security issue. The challenge remains: how to find an effective mechanism for limiting the role of force and violence in world politics. In view of the apparently limitless potential for weapons proliferation and military technological innovation, peace activists do us all a service in reminding us that there is no future in war.

But is the Left equal to the challenge? Issues of war and the exercise of force have always been a problem for the liberal conscience. The rejection, by large sections of the Left, of the legitimacy of the UN role in the Gulf crisis, no doubt has many causes. But it is difficult to believe that it does not have a lot to do with a deeply felt disinclination to countenance the use of force, even by a body like the UN, and even when the use of a small amount of force now might obviate the need for greater force later. The point was nowhere better demonstrated than with regard to the sanctions issue. Sanctions are widely and rightly regarded as preferable to the full-scale use of military force. It is a tragedy that the problem of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was not resolved through the use of sanctions. But effective use of the sanctions option in this case required not only a willingness on the part of the allies to give them time to work, but also, meaningful enforcement. In practice, this meant an air and naval blockade of Iraq. But large sections of the Left, even while protesting that sanctions were not being taken seriously, were demanding that Australia's naval contribution to the enforcement of those sanctions, be withdrawn.

The point is raised, not in any sense of enthusiasm for the use of force, nor even in support of sanctions, but as an indication of the intellectual difficulties the Left might experience in meeting the challenge of the problems of international security problem.

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