By inviting United States military forces onto Saudi territory, the Saudi ruling family has confirmed the underlying reality of economic dependence and political alliance in the Arabian peninsula and the divide between the rich and poor in the Arab world.

Saddam Hussein appears to have miscalculated gravely the capacity of Iraq to redraw the political map of the Middle East in his Baathist image of the ‘single Arab nation’ presently divided into 22 Arab states. The rapidity with which international economic sanctions have been introduced and US forces sent to Saudi Arabia is quickly revealing the vulnerability of Iraq.

Many Western analysts have emphasised the threat of Iraq’s large battle-hardened military forces, yet the course of the Iran-Iraq war suggests a different picture. Iraq, for most of the eight years of war against Iran, fought a defensive action against Iranian forces. Moreover, Iraq’s military defence was only achieved with huge payments from the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia and ready access to Western arms supplies. Even with this finance and arms Iraq was unable to force a cease-fire. Its military weakness saw it resort to using internationally banned chemical weapons to blunt the Iranian offensive and eliminate internal Kurdish opposition, allow Turkish troops to pursue troublesome Kurdish fighters into northern Iraq and escalate the shipping war in the Gulf.

It was an Iraqi air attack on the USS Stark which was the catalyst to bring international naval forces into the Gulf to protect oil tankers. At the time the action was seen as a desperate Iraqi bid to stop Iranian oil exports by internationalising the conflict. Saddam claimed as a victory a military stalemate achieved by economic ruin and war weariness of both belligerents.

In the present situation where a heavily indebted Iraq cannot export its oil, has no financial backers and will find it very difficult to obtain armaments, the Iraqi army looks a much less formidable force. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was not achieved by armed might but by surprise. The crisis Iraq has precipitated has challenged the system of US client states in the region and revealed the essential dependence of the oil-rich Gulf states on external Western military backing. This is the drama now being played out.

It looks increasingly likely that Saddam’s military designs will be restricted to Kuwait and not precipitate a military confrontation with US forces on the Saudi border. As indicated by his announcement of the annexation of Kuwait, Saddam’s strategy will be to sit tight and try to limit the impact of international sanctions and blockades by seeking Arab support through popularising his actions among the Arab people.

Statements coming out of Baghdad about US and Israel military collusion against Iraq and the call for a popular Arab force to fight alongside the Iraqi army are designed to invoke popular support for the historic anti-imperialist causes of Arab unity - the defeat of US imperialism and its regional allies. The ‘righteousness’ of the Iraqi cause will be expressed in its implacable opposition to Israel and the oil-rich sheikdoms, the longstanding symbols of Western imperialist presence in the region.

No doubt Saddam Hussein will hope that his appeal to the Arab people would topple Arab regimes presently opposed to his mission, much in the same way that the Iranian clerics hoped the Iranian Islamic revolution would take root in a popular Islamic uprising against regimes in the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia. He is likely to achieve the less ambitious objective of paralysing Arab states’ efforts to achieve a unity of action against him and ensure that a total blockade of Iraq will not be possible.

Saddam will also take comfort from the lack of staying power demonstrated in previous US interventions in the region. Lebanon and Iran were notable failures in US interventionist policy.

Other elements in Saddam’s strategy of sitting tight in Kuwait are the implied threats to make hostages of thousands of Westerners on Iraqi and Kuwaiti territory and to use chemical weapons against any military forces used against Iraq. The former may have already been a major factor in restraining military action against Iraq immediately after its invasion. Hostages and chemical weapons make Western military action to remove Iraqi troops from Kuwait extremely hazardous and emphasise the importance of economic sanctions in international action against Iraq.

The US brinkmanship of placing US forces on the Saudi border with Iraq is designed to force Saddam to back down or bring about his downfall by precipitating a crisis within Iraq itself. This cannot be relied upon. Saddam’s years in power have been secured through personal ruthlessness against any opponents including members of the Revolutionary Command Council.
Iraqi schoolchildren prepare to follow in Saddam's footsteps

and his closest colleagues. Moreover, the idea of an Arab leader who can stand up militarily to the West is a seductive image for a region which blames its problems on the penetration of imperialism. Saddam's invasion of Kuwait might be universally abhorred in the West, but in the Arab world it can easily be turned into an expression of personal power and hope for a better Arab future. It has a millenarian quality about it.

It is the possibility of military escalation and greater regional conflict which is most worrying to the West. The invasion highlights the economic fragility rather than the military weakness of the international economy. At present it is a conflict between Arab states but there is always the potential of another Israeli-Arab confrontation emerging.

This could be the result of a deliberate strategy by Saddam Hussein to turn attention away from Kuwait to Israel 'the old common Arab enemy', or the result of the destabilisation of Jordan, the state that provided the vital land access to Iraq during the long Iran-Iraq war. In either case, another Arab-Israeli war and Arab defeat would deepen the conflict in the Arab world and in the worst scenario see the 'Jordan is Palestine' doctrine imposed through the annexation of the Occupied Territories by Israel.

The Iraq invasion and annexation of Kuwait is a disastrous development for the Arab states. It sets back the potential for negotiated settlements of the longstanding regional conflicts, undermines processes towards democratisation in the Arab states and increases the likelihood of Western interventions in the region in any future crises.

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Brown Danube

From Berlin to Sofia, outcry against environmental neglect wove a common thread through the protest movements and political upheavals in Eastern Europe. But no sooner were the mechanics of Western democracy and market capitalism set in motion than popular ecological demands faded into the background. With a forum for social dialogue finally open, activists now confront structures considerably more formidable than their frail bureaucracies of the past.

Nowhere has the ecological movement collapsed so completely as in Hungary. In the wake of multi-party elections, the first pro-environment voice in the East finds itself more powerless and splintered than ever before. Given Eastern Europe's shattered economies and populations still burdened with the legacy of stalinism, the paralysis of Hungary's green movement could well foreshadow the fate of its counterparts throughout the region.

Following Solidarity's lead in Poland, the Blue Danube movement here appeared in the mid-80s to contest single-party state's monopoly on power and information. While centred around opposition to the Gabčíkov-Nagymaros dam project, the popular initiative set precedence as a broadbased political movement. The space that it opened within civil society paved the way for a myriad of other then-illegal groups to surface. Once unleashed, the protest forces sent the ruling party into steady retreat, culminating in its defeat at the polls this spring.

The "Blues" innovative and feisty spirit raised since-unfulfilled hopes for protest politics in Hungary. In 1984, the Danube Circle group, a mix of professionals, intellectuals and concerned citizens formed to oppose the joint Hungarian-Austrian-Czech hydroelectric power plant to be constructed on the Danube Bend north of Budapest. During the four-year campaign, hundreds of thousands signed petitions, samizdat publications sprang up and, for the first time since 1956, Hungarians took to the streets.

A model of stalinist thinking, the dam project underlined the regime's flagrant disregard for the environment. The collaborators' rape of the eco-system followed logically four decades of production at all costs. Justified with pseudo-scientific research and shrouded in secrecy, the project characterised the state's approach to decision-making.

The state's track record weighs heavily on activists today. "We have next to no data on the real extent of environmental destruction," explains Judith Vaszaryhelyi, a founding member of the Danube Circle and now executive director of the Independent Ecological Centre (IEC) in Budapest. Information on nuclear energy, toxic waste and pesticides that 800 towns are the water resources with industrial ease and infant mortality. So polluted that bum brown coal account for excessive instances of respiratory disease and infant mortality. So polluted are the water resources with industrial waste and pesticides that 800 towns have drinking water imported in tanks.

From the Technical University Green Circle to the Association of Hungarian Ornithologists, a plethora of like-minded organisations have formed to confront the catastrophe at hand. The fragmented groups, however, have been unable to reach the bulk of the population. "The dam was a symbol for the communist party," admits Vaszaryhelyi. "There wasn't really an environmental consciousness beneath the movement. And we failed to broaden it beyond the one issue." The goal of the newly-formed IEC is to create a basic awareness of the problems that Hungary faces.

With extensive green posturing, the political parties have done their share to channel ecological angst away from a grassroots movement. The parties' domination of the political sphere in a country raised on party rule has stunted the development of an alternative to parliamentary politics. Every party professes a staunch commitment to the environment. Yet they offer neither concrete policies nor a plan to integrate that pledge into the transition to a market economy.

Green issues have yet to make their debut on the floor of parliament. The country's $20 billion debt has the government and opposition alike scrambling to meet ruthless IMF and World Bank repayment schedules. With the lords of international capital dictating policy, even the best-intentioned office holders would be hard-pressed to implement costly new regulations or tighten the lax penalties against polluters. The government is equally anxious not to scare off foreign investment. The circumven-

ALR: SEPTEMBER 1990
The small elegant car seen racing on highways with its speedometer showing 100kmh, very nice runner, one careful owner - any offers?

Hon of home standards is an attractive feature for Western big business.

The country finds itself in no less of a predicament on the question of nuclear power. The dam scrapped and the days of Soviet oil numbered, environmentalists themselves have grudgingly come to endorse the nuclear option in order to cut back on brown coal. After only a month in office, the ruling coalition started negotiations with French multinationals about financing additional atomic power plants here. The initiative reverses the former government's moratorium on new reactors that was laid down in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster.

The patterns of Third World underdevelopment and exploitation are becoming increasingly evident in Eastern Europe. "The government uses the same justifications for the nuke plants that the communists did for the dam," argues Zsusza Beres of the Green Alternative Group. "They say it will be good for Hungary because then we can pay off our creditors in energy. They say that we don't have a choice."

Chances for an anti-nuke movement are slim. "No one will question the new stations," fears Beres. "In school we learned that nuclear energy was the cheapest, cleanest and safest form of energy. People just aren't conscious of the risks."

The Green Party itself stands irrevocably split after a sound drubbing in the election. Unable to field candidates in most constituencies, Eastern Europe's second oldest ecological party wound up with less than 0.5% of the national vote. The Greens' internece factionalism is an eastern version of the familiar western phenomenon. Formed in October 1988, hostility broke out immediately between a party-oriented wing and proponents of a looser, movement concept for the group. The former dissidents and activists, many coming from the Danube Circle, pushed for a grassroots alliance of green groups, focusing on disarmament and social issues as well. The victorious wing, however, mostly fresh converts from the communist party, insisted on a more narrowly defined electoral strategy.

The former oppositionists felt ill at ease with the standard party structures and hierarchy, explains Gabor Hraski, director of the East European Environmental Network. "It seemed that the present leadership just wanted a new bureaucracy which they could fit into again. The Greens now are more like a traditional conservation party than the broad political forum some of us had hoped for," says the former member.

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Questions without Answers

Bob Hawke suggesting improvements to the federal parliamentary question time has about as much credibility as the Emperor Nero proposing fire prevention services for ancient Rome. No one in living memory has done more to destroy the dubious usefulness of that three-quarters of an hour after the Speaker asks, rhetorically: "Questions without notice. Are there any questions?"

Blood oath there are. The problem, since at least the mid 1970s, is that there are no answers - or at least, none that haven't been nutted out at tiresome length in the Pritikin-diet filled rooms of the ministers and their myriad advisers.

To be fair to Hawke, he didn't begin the process of turning what was always a dubious political institution into a total laughing stock. Governments have always abused question time to a greater or lesser extent, the greater bit coming when they find themselves in trouble.

In 1975 Gough Whitlam, aided and abetted (for at least some of the time), by parliamentary performers of the calibre of Clyde Cameron and Fred Daly indulged in masterpieces of obfuscatory filibustering whenever the loans affair, or associated disasters, were mentioned. From the other side of the chamber, Malcolm Fraser and his colleagues watched and learned. During their seven years in the drivers' seats they gave little away.

It was really during this period that the so-called Dorothy Dix question was refined to an art form. A Dorothy Dixer is a question asked by a government backbencher to a minister who is aware of its basic content. In the distant past it was a genuine request for information from the backbencher who, if on the same side as the minister, gave the minister forewarning of it as a matter of courtesy. Alas, in the last generation the Dorothy Dixer has changed from a ritual whereby the door is opened for a visitor to a studied method of emptying the jerry can on the head of a passer by.

These days, most backbenchers' questions on both sides are written, not by the members themselves, but by the party tacticians. Opposition questions tend to be along the lines of "When did you stop beating your wife?" Government questions tend to be along the lines of "Why are you the greatest minister it is ever likely to be my privilege to meet and, incidentally, what do you think about those opposition scumbags?" The result has been that question time has developed into little more than a slanging match, and, given that the only real control the speaker (a member of the governing party) has is to demand that answers be relevant, the ministerial executive holds all the cards.

It was during the Fraser years that a member of the parliamentary library produced a critique titled "Questions without Answers", pointing out that the process had become almost entirely meaningless except as political theatre - even political soap opera. David Solomon, journalist and political scientist, has written optimistically about the possibility of reform. But nobody (least of all those who believe that our parliamentary system has anything to do with the British model from which it is derived) would argue sensibly that question time is a deep and meaningful experience for anyone other than the participants.

The record of the Hawke government has been particularly woeful. Opposition leader John Hewson claims that the average number of questions asked on any given day has shrunk from 16 in the Fraser years to 10 these days. Even allowing for exaggeration, the record is pitiful: the British parliament would manage twice the number in the same time.

So, says our Prime Minister in one of his more sanctimonious moods, let's do something about it. Let's move to a system like the Poms, where ministers know that they are going to be questioned on a particular day, and then cross-examined on their answers. It is not entirely clear how this would eliminate the filibuster, at which Hawke himself is a somewhat convoluted expert. It is, however, clear that it would shield ministers from parliament for much of the year.

As a former speaker, Gordon Scholes, has mentioned, there are a lot more sitting days at Westminster than there are in Canberra, which means that, on the roster system, more ministers get put on the griller more often. Admittedly, the opposition in parliament is not the only inquisition ministers face; but it is the least legally trammelled and most public one. Hewson argues that televising the proceedings would force question time back into its original form.

He may be right, but it will take a while. As long as Hawke treats the chair next to the despatch box in the same way he treated the platform at a strike meeting, questions without notice will remain bile without alka seltzer.

MUNGO MACCALLUM long watched over the parliamentary bear pit from the press gallery.
Blue Hill

National broadcasters all around the world have at least one thing in common, according to David Hill, managing director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. They are all in considerable trouble.

Of course he's absolutely right, as far as the ABC is concerned, but for some of the wrong reasons. Hill was speaking at "Australia's National Broadcasters in the Nineties", a conference organised by the public sector friends of the ABC at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum.

He's absolutely right when he talks about the impact of continuing funding cuts. The relentless erosion of budgets over many years has been the single most damaging factor at work in the ABC. The three year funding agreement with the federal Labor government, which was supposed to protect the national broadcaster, has resulted in a shortfall of about $80 million. In real terms, this means fewer jobs, lower real wages and outdated equipment. It's tough trying to reason with a Labor government ready to deny its own history and indeed its recent experience, as it rushes to apply Thatcherite fairy tales about the benefits of privatisation.

You see, according to the Minister for Transport and Communications, Kim Beazley, "public funding creates both opportunities and responsibilities". "With the security of public funding the SBS and ABC can afford to be at the cutting edge of broadcasting providing innovative programs," Beazley said.

Who is he kidding? But then this is the man who is taking the 'moderate' line in Cabinet by only wanting to privatise part of the public-owned telecommunications system. Keating would flog off much more, and whispers darkly that if we don't something truly awful will happen.

Under these circumstances, you can understand why David Hill gets on the piss. Mind you, ABC management isn't really celebrated for innovation. Just look at management's list of "priorities and changes" for radio. Specific initiatives include "more rigorous auditioning of new on-air staff", "a program evaluation system" and, most exciting of all, "better responsiveness to scheduling changes".

Television boasts of a "user pays" costing system, which will make program makers fully accountable for all the resources they use.

More controls and more restrictions from the folks who fell over themselves to scab during the recent strike by unionised ABC staff.

If you only had the chaos and cynicism of Australia's commercial media to judge the ABC by, you just might accept this sterile formula for "Broadcasters in the Nineties".

But then look at what's happening overseas.

Liz Forgan is Director of Programs for Britain's Channel 4, a station with all the benefits of a government charter and of advertising. "Our brief said innovative, so we turned everything on its head," she said.

"We would make programs differently. We would approach the audience differently, we would value different things from every other channel. We would steer right away from the mass in the middle and roll about on the margins of everything," Liz Forgan said.

That is a fair walk from David Hill's drive towards the centre to slug it out with the commercials in the ratings. Even more revolutionary is Channel 4's aim to turn over its entire commissioning staff every ten years.

"We told our program suppliers that even if they did a brilliant job for us, the time would come when we would say thanks very much, the last series was wonderful, but now it's someone else's turn to start all over again and so goodbye."

Sadly, there are those in ABC management who would see such an approach as an opportunity to get rid of trouble-making programmers. One only has to witness the number of mates recycled from failed commercial programs to work under quad­rupe award contract at ABC television to see how ABC management would interpret Ms Forgan's idea of permanent revolution in broadcasting.

"We must stick to the work, to the writing, the truth telling - to the range, freshness and quality of the programs themselves and the rest will follow," she said.

"Good broadcasting is free broadcasting. Free to think and argue and even to offend, in the interests of serious journalism and artistic integrity," Liz Forgan said.

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