

Blogging a dead horse

All wars are ultimately contests of will and end when one side gives up. What is more, democracies can only wage war successfully if popular support for continuing to fight persists. This used to occur readily in Australia, particularly in the era when many adult Australians had fought or lived through World War II – and consequently had first-hand experience of war and how Australia’s strategic vulnerabilities could end up directly affecting their day-to-day lives.

The situation in Iraq, although still far from ideal, continues to improve and Australia is consequently scaling down its military involvement there. The focus of public attention – where it exists – naturally now turns to our participation in the UN-endorsed, NATO-led, Western Coalition effort in Afghanistan.

Depending on the question asked, and its assumptions, opinion polling trends seem to show that public support for Australia’s military efforts in Afghanistan is declining. And that the rate of decline might be increasing. Given that the Afghanistan commitment, unlike Iraq, had been strongly supported generally – and by the major parties on both sides of politics – from the start, the reasons for these apparent trends need to be pursued and actively reversed.

Some of this opposition, of course, is due to unadulterated anti-Americanism even when disguised as anti-Bushism. This underlies much of the cultural and psychological transference of opposition to the Iraq war across to the one in Afghanistan.

The major contributor to the problem, however, has been the reluctance or inability of the previous Howard Government, or the new Rudd one, to argue the case for being in Afghanistan well enough to stop, slow or reverse public opinion trends.

This is not helped by limited public knowledge about the war or Afghanistan, or the potential wider consequences of losing both the war and the country. Perversely, in fact, the lack of knowledge or understanding leads many to question our motives for being there on quite nebulous grounds – and then to criticise our involvement and advocate withdrawal for equally simplistic reasons. To paraphrase G.K. Chesterton, when someone ceases to believe in a cause they do not believe in nothing, they believe in everything.

As the Spring 2007 *Defender* discussed, globalisation of information flows using the Web also has a downside in that it has allowed extremists, conspiracy theorists, the ignorant and the plain nasty to meet, keep in touch and spread their various messages of stupidity, lunacy and bile. With much of the blogging ostensibly “discussing” Australia’s military commitment to Afghanistan, for example, the collapse of informed and effective public debate shown has to be seen to be believed.

But no matter whether this dearth of informed debate results from ignorance, bias, malevolence or lack of empathy for the struggling people of Afghanistan, it thrives because of an intellectual and moral vacuum otherwise. The Australian Government, and Opposition, need to desist from party-political point-scoring on such defence and strategic issues.

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Our cover

Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan: Lieutenant Anneke Kerklaan, commanding a troop of construction engineers in the Australian Reconstruction Task Force, with Flight Lieutenant Daphne, the pilot of a Dutch Apache attack helicopter supporting Coalition troops - both with their tools of trade. Photo courtesy of the ADF

They need to put the national interest first and actively argue the case for our necessarily long-term commitment to the physical, cultural and psycho-social rebuilding of Afghanistan.

Finally, it is also too easy to blame the often patchy media coverage and commentary for the lack of information, interest and proper debate generally. The Australian people deserve and need to know what our troops in Afghanistan are actually doing in detail, especially at the grassroots level of helping the Afghans to help themselves. Even within the obvious constraints of operational security much more information could and should be released by the Government and the ADF. If this is not done, we risk losing the war in Afghanistan back here in Australia. ♦