

Bush's Barbecue

Dennis Altman

Alison Broinowski
HOWARD'S WAR

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THANKS TO ALISON BROINOWSKI and Scribe, we now have an Australian booklet that seeks to make sense of the recent war in Iraq and of Australia's participation in the war. Whatever shortcomings the book has — and shortcomings are inevitable when the slow art of book publishing seeks to keep up with contemporary events — its presence in the public arena is important, and both author and publisher have been brave in producing it so quickly.

Broinowski is right to say that there was no basic justification for Australia's role in the war. As time goes on, I am more inclined to agree that the undoubted benefits of overthrowing Saddam Hussein's régime are outweighed by the fallout from his defeat through an imperial invasion. Broinowski is also correct in stressing the central role of John Howard's particular picture of the world, though she could have said more about the ways in which Howard has become increasingly involved in foreign policy issues and, in so doing, has restored the US alliance to a centrality many thought had ended with the Cold War.

Even at the time, there seemed no justification for Australia taking part in a war so far away and so unconnected with any assessment of possible threats to our national security. Imperial powers such as the US determine their actions through a logic that does not apply to small countries. For the government, the basic reason for our involvement was to demonstrate, yet again, our reliability as an ally of the US. A cynic might observe that the more isolated the Americans become, the greater the value of our unquestioning support.

Whether this support translates into more than the occasional barbecue for the Howards at the Bush ranch, a sacrifice they are clearly happy to make for their nation, is less clear. Any doubt about how inconsequential was our involvement was dispelled for me when I was in Europe during the aftermath of the Iraqi war and on CNN saw Poland, not Australia, portray itself as the successful third member of the 'Coalition of the Willing'.

Broinowski's booklet is in the tradition of political pamphlets since Thomas Paine. Like all pamphlets, it sacrifices nuance in the service of indignation. Arguably, Howard's policies have made it more difficult for us to be accepted as full partners by ASEAN, but given the character of some of the governments involved — Malaysia, Vietnam, Burma — this is a mixed loss. There is always a problem in using realpolitik arguments to dispute a position that is assailed on moral grounds, and Broinowski is too willing to use any argument against those she attacks, even when they are

potentially inconsistent. Does she really believe that the preservation of wheat sales to Iraq should be a guiding principle in Australian foreign policy?

In one sense, this small and hastily written book tries to achieve two quite different ends: both to make sense of the Bush administration's foreign policy and to explain why the Howard government has embraced its view of the world with such enthusiasm.

On US policies, Broinowski has little new to say, and an interested reader would do better to read through the last six months of the *New Yorker*, which has consistently published revealing and sophisticated analysis. Lumping together US interventions in 'Panama, Grenada, Kuwait, parts of former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and now Iraq' is to risk oversimplifications that deny the complex mix of ideology, perceptions of national security and imperialistic ambition behind US policies. Broinowski never tells us whether there are US interventions of which she approves.

Moreover, haste means she is sometimes guilty of the sort of racial and religious stereotyping she criticises. 'In 1993,' she writes, 'Arabs bombed the World Trade Centre'; 'men of Jewish ancestry' feature among the new hardline warriors — this sort of language bothers me, for its blurring of the line between ethnicity and ideology.

The second question is one that she is well placed to answer, particularly in light of her most recent publication, *About Face: Asian Accounts of Australia* (2003). Here, I would have liked more analysis and in particular more exploration of the quite extraordinary way in which Howard neutralised the opposition to Australian participation, which had seemed so strong in the immediate lead-up to the war. It is too easy to say we acted in traditional knee-jerk reaction by supporting our 'great and powerful friends', and with little regard for Asian opinion. Even allowing that there is some truth to this, the political decision to send troops — where we went

much further than such traditional friends and allies of the US as Canada — requires a more nuanced explanation.

I might note here the one glaring error in Broinowski's book: the claim that 'it was the first armed intervention by Australia that lacked bipartisan support'. This is a particularly odd error, even for a book written in haste, as the bitter debates around Australia's involvement in Vietnam — opposed by Labor from the initial announcement in 1965 that troops would be sent — prefigured so much of the debate earlier this year around our involvement in Iraq.

To write a political polemic requires both acidic wit and the ability to recognise the limits of one's case, neither of which is Broinowski's forte. Her case is stronger now than when, a few months ago, she finished what must have been a remarkable feat of quick writing, and her warnings that the war will only unleash greater discontents and suffering seem prescient. I am in agreement with at least eighty per cent of her critique. Still, reading *Howard's War* left me strangely dissatisfied.

I had similar feelings at large meetings at the recent Melbourne Writers' Festival and at the Festival of Ideas in Adelaide, where discussion of the present world was dominated by a seeming desire to find only fault in the Bush administration, and a corresponding dismissal of Howard as an unreflective puppet of US greed and malice. The real problem with this position is that it is not shared by the majority of Australians. Unless we are prepared to dismiss everyone who supported the war as boors and fools, we need make a greater effort to understand their views.

It has become a cliché to note that allied governments fail to understand how the world appears to the majority of its citizens. I fear that those of us who oppose our governments in the allied world equally fail to understand those who are still able to win majority support for policies Broinowski and I can agree are both immoral and ineffective.