

'Gutless' Howard gags debate

February 14, 2007

Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd has accused John Howard of lacking courage as the Labor leader called for a debate on Iraq foreign policy.

Seconds after today's parliamentary sitting began, Mr Rudd moved to suspend the House of Representatives program for an hour so he could debate the prime minister on Australia's involvement in the war in Iraq.

But Veterans' Affairs Minister Bruce Billson immediately moved a motion to cut off Mr Rudd, which succeeded along party lines.

The government then used its numbers in the lower house to defeat Mr Rudd's motion 59 votes to 81.

Mr Rudd said he wanted to debate Mr Howard's false basis for the decision to go to war; his misuse of intelligence material to justify his decision; his failure to articulate a mission statement, exit strategy, and strategy to win the war; and his attack on the United States' Democrats.

"And ... the prime minister's lack of guts and courage in refusing to accept the leader of the opposition's challenge to a nationally televised debate on Labor's plan to bring our troops home and the prime minister's plan to leave our troops in Iraq indefinitely," he said.

Mr Howard, who has been under fire for his attack on US presidential hopeful Barack Obama's Iraq policy, yesterday labelled Mr Rudd gutless for dodging questions about the consequences of an early US withdrawal from Iraq.

Mr Rudd, who has challenged Mr Howard to a televised debate on the issue, today reiterated that his policy would be a withdrawal of Australian forces, in consultation with the Americans at the end of a six-month troop rotation.

He said it was Mr Howard who did not have a plan.

"Mr Howard in this debate talks about guts and courage . . . guts and courage doesn't involve sending the sons and daughters of Australian families to fight a war with no exit strategy in mind for them," Mr Rudd told ABC Radio.

"Guts and courage also lies in rising to the challenge of a nationally televised debate on his alternative plan for Iraq and mine."

Australia has no deadline for removing its 1400 troops from Iraq.

"The alternative strategy, by the way, is a continuation of the current military strategy which, after four years, has failed," Mr Rudd said.

"I have a clear exit strategy for those Australian troops, Mr Howard has none and my challenge to him is: what is his alternative strategy (and) if he is a man of courage to tell the Australian people how he intends to win the war in Iraq."

Mr Rudd said a withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq would have to be followed with immediate political pressure on warring Islamist groups.

Mr Rudd, quoting the US Baker Hamilton Report, said a staged withdrawal of troops through until the first

quarter of 2008 was the best response to ongoing deaths among both coalition forces and Iraqi civilians.

"If you look at the Baker Hamilton plan it talks about a staged withdrawal of US troops into the year 2008 and the consequences which flow from that are how do you best provide the necessary political pressure on the warring Sunni and Shiite factions to bring about some sort of political consensus which ends the civil war," Mr Rudd told ABC Radio.

Mr Howard, speaking on radio at about the same time as Mr Rudd, again challenged the Labor leader to voice his view on the consequences of coalition forces withdrawing from Iraq by next March.

He again defended his decision not to accept Mr Rudd's challenge to a TV debate, saying the pair debated each other in the parliament.

He accused the opposition leader of using the debate as a "smokescreen" to avoid expressing his own views on the consequences of Mr Obama's policy to withdraw troops from Iraq by March next year.

"I have said what I think will be the consequences and they are very serious . . . what I'm saying to Mr Rudd is will you do the same thing," Mr Howard told Macquarie Radio.

"He doesn't need a televised debate with me to say that, all he needs to do is to go out and front the media and say 'in my view if coalition forces were withdrawn in March of next year the following would be the consequences'."

Mr Howard said Mr Rudd must explain what the consequence for "American prestige and therefore Australia's interest" would be if the US was seen to be defeated in Iraq.

He said Iraqis would not be able to look after themselves by March next year and, while his stance on Iraq might not be popular, it was at least consistent.

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