

Terrorists and Weapons of Mass Destruction
P J Keating
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John Howard said in the House of Representatives last week that "the ultimate terrorist nightmare would be if weapons of mass destruction were to fall into the hands of Osama bin Laden and his cohorts." I couldn't agree more. The threat that terrorists might launch attacks on our cities is real.

Mr Howard went on, however, to draw from that threat the conclusion that "efforts must be sustained by the nations of the world to remove from the hands of people who might capriciously use them, weapons of mass destruction."

He was obviously preparing ground for an argument that a unilateral attack on Iraq is the same thing as war on terrorism because Saddam Hussein's suspected weapons might fall into the hands of terrorists.

In fact, terrorists are likely to find their weapons in more familiar circumstances - from fissile material leaking out of the insecure stockpiles in the former Soviet Union, or, as we almost certainly saw with the anthrax attacks in the United States last year, from within the American defence establishment itself.

But Mr Howard's use of that word "capriciously" was revealing. It suggests that sober, thoughtful, non-capricious use of such weapons could be contemplated.

And the idea that underpins such thinking comes to the heart of the problem for me. It is based on the notion that somehow we can keep weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of irresponsible and dangerous people, while maintaining them for the right sort of people - people, in other words, like us and our allies.

We are probably now stuck with the phrase "the War on Terror", but it is a dangerously misleading metaphor for the dangers we face. For most people it conjures up images of a clear enemy, fixed battles, military or intelligence solutions and, at the end of it all, an unconditional victory over our opponents.

Instead, we are engaged in a long struggle on many fronts against shifting groups and individuals. To prevail, we need better intelligence gathering, more effective protective security, military action in some cases, civilian aid in others.

But as important as any of that, we need to engage in the struggle for ideas. Unless we address the circumstances that spawn the recruitment of terrorists, we will never succeed

in stemming their rise. We could begin by acknowledging the way in which the world has changed but how the structures of power haven't.

The world is still set up on the model which existed in 1947 and it is not run co-operatively. From the UN to the IMF to the G8, it needs a root and branch change, one that acknowledges more fairly the weight and interests of particular countries and regions. India, China and the Middle East come immediately to mind.

And if we are to have any hope of confronting the universally acknowledged danger of more states acquiring nuclear weapons and terrorists getting hold of them, we have to accept that that means getting rid of them for everyone.

If we take the view that some may have them but others not, where is the line to be drawn? Who will be judged a "capricious" user, and who not? Saddam Hussein? Kim Jong-Il in North Korea? America's friend General Musharraf in Pakistan? Israel? And what future tin pot dictator?

So long as some nations reserve the right to have nuclear weapons, others will ask, "Why not us?" And there is no defensible answer to the question. The only way is to get weapons of mass destruction out of everyone's hands.

These weapons were devised as weapons of indiscriminate destruction. They do not discriminate between military targets and civilian populations. It is why they have not been used since their indiscriminate power of destruction was demonstrated to the Japanese in 1945. It is why American battlefield commanders refer to them as "junk". Because they are weapons that such commanders will never get to deploy. And why would they when the US has such hegemony in weapons of accuracy which can surgically take out military targets within built up civilian populations?

We no longer keep nuclear weapons to contain the Soviet Union and they cannot and do not deter terrorists - they can only entice them. It is why many Americans now ask "well, why have them?"

The penny seems never to have dropped for the American Right. US dominance with weapons of accuracy and its overwhelming capacity to project power is allowed to be levelled down by any punk state or terrorist group that decides to develop, or is able to obtain a crude nuclear weapon. And such a weapon is more likely to be delivered in the bowels of a freighter or to be placed surreptitiously as an act of terrorism than it is to arrive via an intercontinental ballistic missile.

In any case, nuclear disarmament itself is already a solemn commitment of the five declared nuclear powers. One made under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. A bargain struck with the non-nuclear states to halt the spread of weapons in return for the weapon states working towards their elimination.

This goal will not be easy. It was never going to be easy. But it must happen. It requires intrusive inspection regimes and, as we see with Iraq, a willingness by the international community to back up commitments with force. But nuclear weapons are not needed. They are the biggest of all accidents waiting to happen.

It was exactly these issues, the dangers related to the spread of nuclear weapons that caused the Government I led to commission the Canberra Commission report on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. The first practical de-nuking document in the world. A report since pigeon-holed by the Coalition.

When the Commission reported in 1996, it based its practical and realistic recommendations on the fundamental assumption that "the proposition that large numbers of nuclear weapons can be retained in perpetuity and never used - accidentally or by decision - defies credibility. The only complete defence is the elimination of nuclear weapons and the assurance that they will never be produced again."

Since the Canberra Commission report, India, Pakistan and now North Korea have signed themselves into the nuclear club. More will join.

Australia has no nuclear weapons of our own but we have two particular strengths that give us standing in this debate. The first is our solid alliance with the United States. The second is our effective national experience in arms control, and particularly nuclear and chemical weapons control. There are few contributions we could more usefully make to the struggle against terrorism.