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The Abbott government and the Islamic State: a securitised and elitist foreign policy discourse

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ABSTRACT
This article analyses the foreign policy discourse that surrounded the Abbott government's 2014 decision to fight the Islamic State (IS). An analysis of parliamentary *Hansard* reveals that the debate featured three prominent axes: the legacy of the 2003 Iraq War; the strategies and objectives of the 2014 mission; and Australia's domestic terror threat level. Throughout, the Abbott government not only marginalised dissenting views, but also justified its renewed engagement in the Middle East via a highly securitised and elitist foreign policy discourse. This finding has consequences beyond the battle against the IS. It reveals a deep-seated tension between the ideals of democratic pluralism and the reality that securitised and elitist foreign policy discourses protect governments from serious scrutiny.

Introduction

The fall of Mosul in June 2014 catapulted the little-known Sunni jihadist group, the Islamic State (IS), onto the world stage. Their conquest of swathes of Iraq and Syria, the humanitarian crises they created, and the possibility that they would further destabilise the Middle East, led the United States and its allies to quickly engage with the emerging threat. Despite the failures of the 2003 Iraq War, and having only withdrawn the last US troops at the end of 2011, US President Obama (2014) vowed to 'degrade, and ultimately destroy' the IS. He forged a coalition of 68 countries,[1] and under the Liberal–National (Coalition) government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Australia signed up. Australia's contribution to the conflict escalated rapidly: in mid-August the government ordered the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to provide humanitarian aid to the besieged Yazidi minority group in northern Iraq, and later the same month the ADF provided weapons to the Kurdish Peshmerga. By mid-September the government announced that the National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSC)[2] had decided to deploy 600 ADF personnel and numerous attack aircraft to the region, and by 9 October Australia had conducted its first successful airstrike on the IS. Citing historical precedent, the Abbott government justified its unilateral decision to fight based on the 'war-powers prerogative' of the executive,[3] which did not require parliamentary consultation or approval. Branded

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'Operation Okra', Australia's commitment to fight the IS was one of the largest military forces in the coalition after the United States.[4] While the IS had lost the majority of its territories by late 2017, the debate around Australia's deployment still bears scrutiny.

The ADF deployed into a multifaceted war in a region plagued with conflict: heightened tensions engulfed Iraq since the 2003 war and the sectarian conflict of 2006–7; a brutal civil war had ravaged Syria since the 2011 protests; ongoing Kurdish independence struggles continued across both Iraq and Syria; and tensions between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia were occurring on various fronts. Despite the seemingly clear goal of 'destroying' the IS, the reality on the ground was more complicated than the Australian government conveyed to the nation. With the potential for a drawn out engagement in the Middle East resulting from Australian involvement, government openness on the decision to deploy might have strengthened Australia's democracy. In time, Abbott's decision to fight the IS may be judged as being in Australia's national interest. However, whether the *debate* around that decision was in the national interest also needs to be studied.

Considering the deep public disapproval of Australia's role in the invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003, how did the mission to fight the IS in 2014 become politically possible? This article addresses this question by analysing the parliamentary *Hansard* immediately before and after the decision to fight the IS was made. It finds that while dissenting views were heard, these were in the minority and largely ignored. Indeed, polling data taken around the time of the deployment revealed that 54–62 per cent of Australians supported limited military engagement against the IS, explaining the executive's confidence that its policies would prevail despite some parliamentary opposition (Galaxy 2014; Morgan 2014). In light of this, the article explores how governments in democracies can dominate public discourse and sideline dissenters by ignoring their criticisms and casting their opinions as unreasonable foreign policy options. Put simply, this article considers the extent to which the Abbott government 'sold' the 2014 decision to fight the IS to Parliament and the Australian public. It proceeds firstly by considering literature pertaining to the 'war on terror' discourse that formed in Australia under Prime Minister John Howard. Then, it analyses the debate on fighting the IS, as it played out in Australia's Parliament in 2014. From this analysis, three main axes of debate emerge: the legacy of the 2003 Iraq War; the objectives and strategies of the 2014 mission; and the threat of domestic terrorism. The article concludes that despite the promoting of counter-narratives from a small number of parliamentarians, the government's frequent evoking of 'cultural grammar' (Gleeson 2014, 1), or indifference in the face of criticism, ensured that its discourse achieved dominance while dissenting voices were marginalised. By 'tracing the evolution' of dominant themes (Gleeson 2014, 48), it is clear that the government effectively tapped into the pre-existing (in)security narrative in Australia, and thus ensured that its policy to fight the IS was effectively unchallengeable. This finding has consequences beyond the decision to fight the IS. It reveals an inherent tension between the ideals of Australia's democratic pluralism and the reality of a securitised and elitist foreign policy discourse.

Elitism, securitisation and foreign policy discourse

Whether democratic governments should consult broadly and facilitate an open debate on significant foreign policy decisions has long been contested by those who hold to an 'elite

model', versus those who favour a 'pluralist model' (Robinson 2016, 169). Elitists argue that decisions ought to be made by the government of the day, who alone possess the requisite information to act on the nation's behalf. The views of the non-elite cannot be trusted when dealing with the 'rational requirements of good foreign policy'; open debate should be as limited as possible, since the 'emotional rather than rational' preferences of the public must be avoided (Morgenthau 1978, 558). Conversely, pluralists contend that citizens ought to be able to influence the foreign policy decision-making process through elected representatives (Risse–Kappen 1991). This higher level of accountability has practical benefits since openness may prevent elites from making decisions that citizens do not agree are in the national interest (McDonald 2015). Despite this ideal, Alterman (1998, 8) finds that in many democracies the foreign policy establishment is insulated from the opinions of citizens, who at most can be seen as 'quietly attentive student[s]'. Baum and Potter (2015) reach similar conclusions, and criticise the elite–public disconnect and the lack of 'democratic constraint' on the executive's control of foreign policy.

In line with the above, this article proceeds from a normative position that sees the pluralist model as being preferable to the elite model. Governments, therefore, can be expected to explain to voters why their military is being deployed to wage war. Despite some practical limitations—including issues around national security, secrecy, and time-sensitive responses to crises—the pluralist model is the *ideal* towards which democracies ought to be working. Of the view that 'government policy should reflect the preferences of its citizens' (Campbell 2012, 272), this article explores the tension between elitist and pluralist foreign policy formation, and considers how dominant discourses can stifle debate.

More than mere descriptors of the world, discourses serve to shape and even construct 'reality'. An application of power, political discourses achieve dominance over 'dissenting voices' by using specific language and ideas to drown out 'alternative truth' (Jackson 2005, 19). McDonald (2005) for instance, considers the way governments can use hegemonic discourses to sustain fears of the 'other'; they can construct security concerns among their populations by using their power to dominate public debate and feed into existing cultural and social narratives. A fear of asylum seekers, for example, is generated by adopting and adapting Australia's historic fears of invasion and demonising the foreign 'other'. Similarly, fears of terrorist attacks are exacerbated and contentious policies justified when governments monopolise public discourse on security threats by using emotive or fear-driven rhetoric (McDonald 2005). To lift the veil on the meaning that political actors construct, the language they employ must be considered. Discourses, as a 'medium through which power operates to create knowledge' (Holland 2010, 644), must therefore be studied to understand the way they are politically enabling.

This paper aims to understand how the Abbott government made possible the policy to fight the IS, 'while excluding other policies as unintelligible or unworkable or improper' (Milliken 1999, 236). To do so, it analyses the 'discursive constructions' (Hansen 2012, 101) used in parliamentary debates, in order to understand the 'crucial role of discourse in the reproduction of dominance' (van Dijk 1993, 253). It builds on a growing body of work that seeks to move beyond asking *why* a foreign policy decision is made, by asking *how* it came about (Doty 1993; Hansen 2012; Hassin and Isakhan 2016; Holland 2012; Larsen 1997; Lee-Koo 2005). By reframing the question, foreign policies can be analysed through a process of 'discursive [de]construction'; instead of taking for granted that

the policy decision was taken, this paper asks how it became 'politically possible in the first place' (Holland 2011, 51).

Specifically, this analysis will add to scholarship around the highly securitised 'war on terror' discourse in Australia. Addressing the Howard governments' decision to invade Iraq in 2003, Gleeson (2014, 14) explores how 'discourse creates social and political realities', and proposes several questions that are also applicable to this article's analysis:

> How do certain constructions achieve resonance with particular identities? How are certain subject positions created in order to achieve this resonance? How were individuals enticed, manoeuvred or coerced into those subject positions? How did other constructions become marginalised in this process? (Gleeson 2014, 15)

Similarly, McDonald and Merefield (2010) ask how Howard was able to 'frame participation in intervention as consistent with the core values of the nation'. They argue that 'rhetorical coercion' and appeals to Australian 'identity constructs' allowed the Prime Minister to deploy troops in an unpopular war without a significant loss of legitimacy (McDonald and Merefield 2010, 190). For his part, Holland (2010) explores the way Howard sold his foreign policy choices by constructing and maintaining a myth of national identity through the use of specific language which aimed to 'embed' his narratives and find 'resonance' in the Australian public. Furthermore, Howard sidelined dissenting voices through a 'coercive' public debate that sought to 'render contestable practices natural, reasonable, logical, necessary, legitimate and even inevitable' (Holland 2010, 646). However, by the time of the 2007 federal election campaign, Australian politics had divided sharply over whether to withdraw from the Iraq war. Kevin Rudd's campaign for the Australian Labor Party was able to successfully assert a counter-narrative to Howard, arguing that Australia should stage a 'responsible withdrawal' because the war had been a 'monumental mistake' (Isakhan 2014).

This article is the first to dissect the complex array of foreign policy discourse around the Abbott government's decision to fight the IS. While there are some broadly relevant scholarly contributions on the Abbott government's foreign policies (McDonald 2015; McLean 2016) and Australia's mission against the IS (Conduit, Malet, and West 2016; Ralph and Souter 2015), these do not address the importance of the discourse in 2014. Despite the strength of the above works, therefore, this paper addresses gaps in the existing scholarship by adding to Australia's 'war on terror' discourse literature. It does so by asking: How did the Abbott government 'sell' the new mission to Parliament? What cultural narratives did it evoke, and which rhetorical practices did it employ, in order to marginalise dissenters and cast their concerns as outside the Australian mainstream?

The debate

The following analysis relies on Parliament's record of proceedings, the *Hansard*, as its key source.[5] Transcripts were downloaded directly from the Parliament House website where any *Hansard* document containing the keyword, 'Iraq' were selected. The period captured in the source material was 1 June–31 October 2014. This represents the days immediately prior to the capture of Mosul by IS, to a number of weeks after the first Australian airstrikes against the group (Isakhan 2015, 2016). The decision to deploy was made without first conducting a parliamentary vote; however, a *post hoc* debate allowed

members of parliament (MPs) to put their views on the public record. It is this debate, along with ministerial statements and Question Time, which reveal the three discursive axes analysed below.

Axis 1: the legacy of 2003

For political rhetoric to be effective, it must find resonance among its target audience by 'being embedded within the domestic cultural context' (Holland 2012, 15). Thus, while the memory of the 2003 invasion of Iraq perhaps ought to have haunted the 2014 debate on Australia's new role in the Middle East, the government focused on stressing the horrors unleashed by the IS. The initial response of shock and outrage was not followed by a balanced consideration of the history and geopolitical realities in Iraq and Syria, nor Australia's prior involvement in the region. The government did not publicly discuss the troubled 2003 Iraq War and its links to the rise of the IS. The ALP, on the other hand, did discuss the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This served the politically expedient purpose of reminding voters that it was the Liberals who had made that costly decision in the first place, but it also provided some perspective lacking from the government's rhetoric. Despite attempts by the Greens, independents, and some Labor MPs to spark debate on the links to 2003, however, the government ignored the issues raised.

On 16 June the Prime Minister (2014a) addressed the House for the first time on the IS, and flagged a possible Australian response to the group, whose 'extraordinary brutality' was unleashing a 'humanitarian disaster' that risked the safety of the entire world. Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop (2014) agreed with Abbott, and in response to a question on Australians fighting for IS, stated that, 'The government [would] not hesitate to take strong action against any person or any group that is a threat to [Australia's] national security.' In casting the IS as a real and immediate challenge to Australia's security, Abbott and Bishop tapped into the nations' persistent insecurities (see McDonald 2005). In using such alarmist language, the government sought resonance with Howard-era rhetoric of insecurity.

Not all in Parliament, however, were satisfied with the direction that the government seemed to be taking the country. In June, independent MP Andrew Wilkie (2014) called for a debate on the links between the 2003 Iraq War, and the rise of the IS. There was 'an urgent need to understand' how Australia got itself into the 'mess in the first place', he argued. Greens MP Adam Bandt (2014a) seconded Wilkie's motion to suspend parliamentary business in order to debate a possible Australian deployment. Bandt questioned the government's intentions, and argued that Australia needed a proper 'debate to ensure that [it] avoid the mistakes of the past'. In response to calls for a debate, Leader of the House Christopher Pyne (2014) stated that the time was not right, but that 'there may well be a time for debate' on Iraq in the future. The motion was subsequently not carried, as only Wilkie, Bandt, and independent MP Cathy McGowan voted in favour of suspending standing orders.

The following week, Bandt introduced a bill to the House that would see parliamentary approval needed for overseas deployments of the ADF. He argued that if a similar requirement for debate and subsequent vote had existed prior to the 2003 Iraq War, the crisis precipitated by the IS may not have occurred (Bandt 2014b). Wilkie seconded the motion and debate on the topic was adjourned. In the Senate, the Green's Scott Ludlam (2014a) asked

whether fighting the IS would not merely 'compound the strategic incompetence of 2003', which was facilitated by a lack of debate and public consultation. This question, and those like it which sought to link the 2003 war and the rise of the IS, were at no point addressed by the members of Abbott's Cabinet in Parliament. This suggests that the government thought the views expressed by the Greens and some independents would find little traction among the wider voting public, and thus required no response.

In August, Leader of the Greens Christine Milne (2014a) asked Leader of the Government in the Senate Eric Abetz whether the 'lessons' from 2003 had been learnt by the government, and whether they would impact any decision to fight the IS. In his response, Abetz (2014a) did not comment directly on 2003, but instead referred to the 'evil force' that had to be prevented from gaining a 'greater foothold' in Iraq and Syria. An interjection by Greens Senator Peter Whish–Wilson (2014a) queried what had caused the rise of the IS 'in the first place'. Abetz (2014a) ignored the interruption, stating that he would not 'dignify it with a response', since the Greens were merely trying to politicise an 'ugly situation'. In a later statement, Whish–Wilson (2014b) questioned the 'mediocrity around the debate', and whether there was a proper understanding of the causes of 'radicalisation' which might help avoid the 2003 error of having 'no long-term plan for keeping the peace'. Independent Senator Nick Xenophon also saw the need to contrast Iraq 2003 with Iraq 2014. While not directly questioning the decision to fight the IS, Xenophon (2014) provided a detailed assessment of the consequences of the 2003 Iraq War. Xenophon argued that the US-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the de-Baathification of Iraq had increased sectarian tension in Iraq, 'fuelled an insurgency', and birthed the IS. The government did not echo this frank consideration of the Iraq War. Had it done so, it might have yielded greater transparency around Australia's controversial military engagement in 2003, and illuminated any ties to the 2014 mission.

It is interesting to note that while members of Abbott's Cabinet were not drawn to comment on the links between Iraq 2003 and the fight against the IS, the ALP explained to the Parliament why the situations differed, by acknowledging the mistakes of the 2003 war, and stressing the differences in 2014. Backbench MP Chris Hayes (2014) argued that Australia had a 'moral responsibility' to intervene in Iraq—based on its involvement in 2003—and could not conscionably watch on and not act. Similarly, Labor MP Stephen Jones (2014) argued that it was 'not a repeat of 2003', because in 2014 the Iraqi government was requesting assistance. Attempting to score political points by reminding Australia that it was a Coalition government that had decided to invade Iraq in 2003, Leader of the ALP Bill Shorten (2014b) insisted that the 2003 invasion 'was a war embarked upon without a meaningful plan to win the peace'. The 2014 action against the IS, however, was different because its aim was 'not to topple a dictator but to support democracy' and 'protect the vulnerable' (Shorten 2014b). Leader of the ALP in the Senate Penny Wong (2014) also outlined the differences between the two conflicts and Australia's role in them. Wong stated that Labor supported the 2014 actions because they differed to the 2003 war that 'did not have widespread international support and did not have the support of the majority of the Iraqi population'.[6]

Despite the ALP's discussion of the legacy of 2003, the Abbott government pursued its decision to fight the IS without discussing any connections to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Instead, Abbott linked the 2014 intervention to the ingrained fear of terrorism that Howard had helped sow among the wider public (Holland 2010). Proponents of a pluralist decision-making model may have expected the Abbott government to firstly explain the

connections between the 2003 Iraq War and the rise of the IS, and secondly, how the decision in 2014 was not repeating the mistakes of the past. The lack of parliamentary discussion about one of Australia's most contentious military engagements, however, and government unwillingness to articulate the differences between 2003 and 2014 reveals a paucity in democratic debate.

Axis 2: objectives and strategies

Key to an informed view of a proposed overseas deployment is knowing the goals and parameters of the mission. A commitment to pluralism might involve the government setting out the goals of armed intervention abroad, as well as some limits that would constrain the military's actions. Through this knowledge, and if the proposed policies are not seen to be in the national interest, the public can exert more 'meaningful and consistent democratic constraint' by opposing the mission (Baum and Potter 2015, 7). The absence of a full disclosure of intent, however, can lead to a 'democratic deficit' around foreign policies, as governments can avoid discussing complex aspects of the mission (Gyngell and Wesley 2007, 144). As it became clear that Australian involvement in Iraq was likely, a number of MPs sought information on the objectives and strategies of the ADF's mission, as they questioned the overall 'lack of clarity about the government's intentions' (Bandt 2014a).

On the first sitting day of Parliament after the winter recess, the Prime Minister was asked whether the government was 'already engaged in mission creep with talks underway for Australian forces to fight in Iraq' (Bandt 2014c). Abbott (2014b) replied, 'Australian forces have already been deployed … as part of the humanitarian relief efforts in northern Iraq'. Two days later Shorten (2014a) asked the Prime Minister for information on 'the role Australia [would] play' in Iraq. Abbott responded:

> [There are] discussions going on between the United States and its friends and allies about what more can be done to avert further disasters in this part of the world … Should we be asked [for military assistance], we would want to look at any request in the light of achievable objectives, a clear role for Australian forces, a full risk assessment, and an overall humanitarian objective. (Abbott 2014c)

Despite these comments, which suggested a future demarcation of Australian involvement in Iraq, the government did not clearly outline what these limits were. Equally, in keeping with tradition, Parliament was neither consulted nor allowed to vote on Australia's involvement, and instead was informed after the Cabinet had made their decision. Citing Prime Minister Ben Chifley's 'light on the hill' speech, Abbott (2014c) reminded the nation that working 'for the betterment of mankind' has always been 'the Australian way—to keep our country safe and to do what we can to build a safer world.' Echoing the style of Howard, in appealing to enduring Australian values such as 'mateship' (see Dyrenfurth 2007; Johnson 2007), Abbott implicitly framed dissenters to his policies as un-Australian.

Furthermore, in a statement that illuminated the inner workings of the executive, and the primacy placed on the Australia–US alliance, Abbott (2014a) outlined the key players involved in shaping Australia's foreign policies:

> As you would expect, there was discussion between myself, and members of my party, and senior figures in the United States. It is, as you would expect, the sort of thing that is natural between two very, very close allies.

In this way, Abbott appears to have hoped that his decision to fight the IS would resonate with Australia's existing cultural terrain when it came to foreign policy making, especially that of the Howard era where following the lead of the United States was viewed as both the norm and preferable (McDonald 2005). The fact that the objectives of Australia's mission were being decided with the US was offered as an acceptable substitute for outlining precisely what those objectives were, beyond 'degrading and ultimately destroying' the IS.

A statement from the Prime Minister the following week revealed that amid the 'witches' brew of complexity and potential danger', the ADF had been providing assistance to trapped Yazidis since mid-August, and would soon be dropping military equipment to the Kurdish Peshmerga to help them battle the 'pure evil' perpetrated by the IS 'death cult' (Abbott 2014d). Despite Abbott's statement, the specifics of these objectives were not revealed to Parliament; the Prime Minister's appeals to emotion were again offered as sufficient and precluded the need for more details.

In the Senate, a motion by the Greens to suspend standing orders in order to seek parliamentary approval for deployment was convincingly beaten, with only Palmer United Party Senator Jacqui Lambie, Liberal Democratic Party Senator David Leyonhjelm, and Xenophon voting alongside the 10 Greens members. In the interest of preserving the 'war-powers prerogative' of the executive, both parties voted *en masse* to prevent parliamentary oversight of the decision to fight. Subsequently, however, Minister for Defence Johnston (2014) read the Prime Minister's statement to the Senate and allocated two hours for senators to respond.

During the debate, Wong echoed Shorten in voicing Labor's support for the government, insisting that Australia had a 'responsibility to respond to humanitarian crises and to take action to prevent genocide' (Wong 2014). Seeking greater clarity, however, Milne (2014b) asked whether the deployment was in Australia's 'national interest', if there was a 'clear and achievable overall objective', or if Australia was just 'blindly following the United States' into another war. The senator also questioned why Australia had a particular moral obligation to act against the IS, when it apparently had not in the face of similar brutality perpetrated by the Tamil Tigers, Boko Haram, and Saudi Arabia, which also 'regularly beheads … and crucifies' people (Milne 2014b). Ludlam (2014b) expanded this argument by questioning what seemed to be an 'open-ended commitment' by the government, as the line between humanitarian aid and combat became increasingly blurry. Ludlam (2014b) also flagged the possible unintended and damaging consequences that might arise from arming 'a group that Australia in part [had] listed as a terrorist organisation, the [Kurdish] PKK'. Greens Senator Richard Di Natale (2014) also spoke on the fallout that might occur from arming Kurds who after defeating the IS, would doubtless continue their decades-long 'fight for self-determination', albeit now armed by Australia.

Also of concern was the lack of clear government intentions and the cost of Australia's latest military endeavour. Lambie (2014), asked, '[W]hat is the long-term strategy? Has the total cost of going to war been calculated or has the total cost of going to war been covered up?' For his part, Whish–Wilson (2014b) criticised the government's eagerness to get involved in the conflict 'without a long-term plan, without a strategic exit and without an explanation to the Australian people of where the risks lie should this conflict to [sic] continue and how long it will take'. Answers to these questions were not forthcoming.

On 14 September, Australia's involvement in the conflict deepened as Abbott announced to the media that he was sending 600 ADF personnel to fight the IS. While framed as a 'humanitarian operation', the Prime Minister could not specify under what circumstances it might transition into 'combat operations', in which case the Australian commitment 'could go on for some time' (ABC 2014). In response to the hazy outline of Australia's role, Milne asked Abetz:

> [G]iven the Prime Minister's decision to deploy fighter aircraft and SAS troops to Iraq, will the Prime Minister now admit that, contrary to original protestations, there are boots on the ground, that our involvement is military and that Australia has been committed to an open-ended war? (Milne 2014d)

Abetz (2014c) replied 'No', and would not be drawn to provide more details to the Senate.

In the House, ALP Deputy Leader Tanya Plibersek (2014) stated that Labor supported the government, provided the ADF's mission complied with the UN's Responsibility to Protect (R2P) criteria for intervention, and with the caveat that it would not 'rubber stamp' an extension of the mission into neighbouring Syria. Similarly, Shorten (2014b) responded to the government's decision to deploy Australian forces, and went into greater detail than Abbott regarding the objectives of the ADF's mission and what the ALP was prepared to accept, including Iraqi government support and limiting the mission to Iraqi territory.

Not sharing her party leader's position, however, Labor MP Melissa Parke broke ranks by questioning the wisdom of entering the conflict:

> Last week on Twitter a person called for my execution for treason because I had questioned the government's rapid escalation of our new involvement in Iraq … [I]t demonstrates how the beating of the drums of war and the hysteria this generates inevitably prevent the kind of calm, serious and rational discussion that is called for when decisions are being made to commit Australians overseas to kill and potentially to be killed. (Parke 2014b)

As well as raising the motives for Australian involvement, Parke (2014b) also argued that the complexities on the ground in Iraq, '[Were] never going to be resolved by outsiders', since the cultural, religious, and ethnic divisions in Iraq could only be addressed by the Iraqi people themselves. These difficult yet important considerations went unanswered, as the government implied through its silence that it was politically unnecessary, and damaging to its executorial legitimacy, to engage in a nuanced debate that would raise more questions than it answered.

Despite the support from the ALP leadership, as Australia's assignment transitioned from aiding trapped Yazidis, to arming the Kurds, and finally to deploying hundreds of ADF personnel and numerous warplanes to the region, there remained a palpable reluctance by the Abbott government to justify and explain the commitment to the Australian Parliament and the people it represented. Neither members of the Cabinet nor the Prime Minister provided detailed answers to questions on Australia's objectives and strategies. Largely unchallenged by the ALP in Parliament,[7] and seemingly unconcerned by the vocal but small resistance of some minor parties and independents, the government was not compelled to clearly delineate Australia's objectives and strategies in its newest war in Iraq. The executive refused to engage properly with dissenting voices; it dominated the foreign policy discourse by saying very little.

Axis 3: threat of domestic terrorism

The security implications for Australia posed by the IS was the third major theme to arise in the debate. Fear of the foreign 'other' in the Australian psyche is a persisting feature of much foreign policy debate (Lee-Koo 2005; McDonald 2005; McDonald and Merefield 2010). A sense of isolation from nations with similar values; fears of unfamiliar regional neighbours; the threat posed by asylum seekers; and the threat of domestic terror attacks—all form part of the cultural narrative of the audience to which Australian governments are seeking to 'sell' their foreign policy. Evidenced—and exacerbated—most clearly under the Howard government, the 'politicisation of danger and an unwarranted yet persuasive manipulation of fear in Australian politics … feeds into a powerful discourse of violent security' (Lee-Koo 2005, n.p.). Taking up where previous governments had left off, Abbott's policy choices were nested in terms familiar to the Australian public. A new mission against a largely unknown enemy in a changed and tumultuous Iraq was cast as merely another front in Australia's perpetual fight against the old enemy—insecurity.

Supporters of Australia's fight against the IS argued that they posed a threat to Australia regardless of Australian action, while opponents insisted that sending troops to the Middle East would only radicalise more individuals, and so intervention would be counterproductive. After meeting with President Obama in the White House in mid-June to discuss Australia-US relations, Abbott (2014a) argued that in trying to establish a 'terrorist state', the IS was a 'security disaster … for the wider world'. Bishop (2014) reinforced this point by stating that the 'up to 150 Australian citizens' fighting with jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq posed 'a major and direct threat to [Australian] security'. Similarly, government backbenchers argued that the IS 'present[ed] a very strong domestic security risk' for Australia (Roy 2014), based on the fact that 'the threat of terrorism has no borders' (Irons 2014). This line of argument—that terrorists could strike 'anywhere at any time', and must therefore be confronted—weaved seamlessly into the discourse that Howard had helped to construct in the wake of the 2002 Bali bombings (Gleeson 2014, 114). While Howard had used the bombings to justify continued involvement in the 'war on terror' (then in Afghanistan, but later Iraq), Abbott used the same fears of imminent domestic terror attacks to justify a new front in the ongoing war.

The government's threat assessment, however, was not universally shared in Parliament, as some questioned the wisdom of fighting in Iraq in order to protect Australians, fearing it may 'provide an even greater focus for more radicalisation and extremism' (Di Natale 2014). Equally, the 'very serious issue of blowback' was another point of contention needing to be 'tested' by Parliament (Bandt 2014d). The government, however, disagreed that Australia risked increasing the terrorist threat, and pointed out that the country had been on jihadists' hit-lists long before the capture of Mosul in 2014. Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss (2014) assured the House that 'aircraft flew into the towers in New York well before the US went to war in Iraq,' and that Australian lives were lost in Bali prior to Australia being 'committed to those conflicts' in Iraq and Afghanistan. Not convinced, Bandt asked Abbott:

> Isn't it the case that, by getting Australia more involved in the war in the Middle East, your government is increasing the risk of an Australian being taken hostage or a terrorist attack occurring on home soil? (Bandt 2014e)

The Prime Minister, while not directly addressing the question, disagreed:

> [P]assivity in the face of the ISIL death cult would be the thing that is most likely to increase the risk of terrorist attacks here in Australia … We all want to ensure that our country is safe. The truth, though, is that, today, national security and international security are indivisible. We cannot preserve national security without doing what we reasonably and prudently and proportionally can to protect and preserve international security.

Further embedding the 2014 operation within the Australian psyche, he reminded Parliament—and the nation:

> [W]e have long been a target … [T]hose who would do us harm hate us, they hate our way of life, they hate everyone—they hate everyone's way of life that does not conform to their own narrow fanaticism. They have declared war on the world. (Abbott 2014f)

By using such emotive 'cultural grammar' the Prime Minister appealed to Australia's fears of terrorist attacks, justified the fight against the IS, and situated dissenters to this perspective as outside the foreign policy mainstream. In so doing, Abbott precluded the need to provide more nuanced perspectives on the foreign policy-domestic terror threat link in Australia.

Of the three axes to appear in the debate, however, it was with this one that the government engaged most thoroughly, both in terms of the number of Cabinet members who spoke to the issue, and their statements. Justifying its policies by tapping into Howard-era (in)security narratives, the government engaged a more 'coercive' style that played on public fears and emotion. Detailed answers on why fighting the IS would not increase the terror-threat level in Australia were not provided, however, as the government appeared to see the fear of terrorism as a more easily justified rationale for action. This is unsurprising, given the ease with which Australia's persisting fears could be relied on to elicit a strong response to the real or perceived threat from the IS. By tying foreign policy decisions to domestic security concerns, the government sought to garner wide support for its decision to fight the IS.

Conclusion

The Abbott government's decision to participate in the effort to 'degrade and ultimately destroy' the IS in 2014 was made quickly and without a comprehensive parliamentary debate on Australia's motives, strategies, or the possible consequences of the decision. By considering the discussion in Parliament, it is clear that a minority of parliamentarians asked serious questions of the government. However, the executive did not comment directly on the legacy of the 2003 Iraq War, and provided minimal details in addressing the other axes of debate.[8] While full disclosure on matters of national security is perhaps unrealistic, a commitment to democratic principles that extends into the foreign policy space would have given rise to a more open parliamentary debate. The government appeared immune to serious scrutiny on the legacy of 2003, the objectives and strategies of the mission, and the threat of domestic terrorism. Those seeking greater clarity on Australia's involvement were marginalised by the executive's emotive descriptions of the IS's barbarity. The repeated calls to stop the 'pure evil' of the 'death cult', and to 'advance our values and build a safer and more secure world' were offered by Abbott (2014e) as sufficient justification for one of the most significant decisions a government can make: waging war. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the persistence of the (in)security narrative in Australian foreign policy

debate was politically enabling in the decision to fight the IS. As under Howard, the Abbott government cast those dissenting to the dominant 'war on terror' discourse outside the Australian cultural and political mainstream. Capitalising on the pre-existing 'cultural grammar' of the Australian public that Howard had helped cultivate (Gleeson 2014, 1), Abbott's at times obstinate and aloof rhetoric was able to cut through the voices of dissenters, despite having little substance. The Prime Minister did not need to shape new cultural narratives, but instead recalled existing foreign policy discourses to prevent significant public opposition.

In time, the Abbott government's decision to fight the IS may well be judged as being in Australia's national interest. The debate around that decision, however, did not strengthen the country's democracy. The fact that the government was able to deploy the ADF abroad without arguing its case to Parliament reveals a lack of pluralism in the formation of foreign policy. The consequences of this research reach beyond the specific case considered here, since it raises questions about Australia's foreign policy decision-making process. Significantly, the analysis has revealed a deep-seated tension between the ideals of pluralism and the reality that securitised and elitist foreign policy discourses protect governments from serious scrutiny.

Notes

1. Information on the 'Global Coalition against Daesh' can be found on the official mission website: http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/home/.
2. At the time, the National Security Committee (NSC) of Cabinet—Australia's foreign policy decision-making body—consisted of Prime Minister Tony Abbott; Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss; Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop; Federal Treasurer Joe Hockey; Attorney-General George Brandis; Minister for Defence David Johnston; and Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Scott Morrison (Uhlmann 2014).
3. While failing in its broader democratic duty to provide public justification for action, the government was legally unrequired to do so, based on Australia's 'war-power' arrangements, which permit the executive to deploy the ADF unconstrained by Parliament. Further work is needed to assess the impact of these arrangements on the decision to fight the IS. For a legal and historical background on the war-making powers of the Australian government, see Sampford and Palmer (2009). For the post-9/11 context, see Barratt (2014) and Larkin and Uhr (2009). For a survey of nearly 50 democracies and their respective approaches to declaring war, see Peters and Wagner (2011).
4. At the height of the mission, there were approximately 780 ADF personnel deployed to the Middle East under Operation Okra (Department of Defence 2017).
5. The authors acknowledge that a key limitation of this study is the narrow range of sources analysed. The article focuses exclusively on parliamentary Hansard across the capture period. While an exhaustive analysis might have included print media, television, social media content, and radio interviews, the authors sought to provide a level of detail that would not have been possible if a wider range of sources had been considered. Specifically, this article sought to focus principally on parliamentary debate rather than broader public opinion or media coverage. Parliament of Australia Hansard can be accessed at: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard.
6. Despite the Opposition leadership's support for the fight against the IS, it should be noted that several ALP members voiced concerns about Australia's involvement in the war against the IS and the legacy of the 2003 war. Labor MP Melissa Parke (2014a) decried that the lack of a robust debate was reminiscent of the 'folly of 2003'. Similarly, Labor MP Kelvin Thomson (2014) argued that Australia 'would be crazy to go back [to Iraq]',

and that rather than becoming involved in an intractable conflict, the government 'should get down on their hands and knees and ask forgiveness for having got it so comprehensively wrong and having created such a political and humanitarian catastrophe' in the first place.

7. In addition to the role of Australia's 'war-power' arrangements, the fact that bipartisanship dominates the formation of Australian foreign policy must be considered in further works as a contributing factor to the government's lack of detailed justification for action. Parliament's commitment to bipartisanship on foreign policy, which prevents effective opposition, is considered by Carr (2017) and Matthews and Ravenhill (1988).

8. A fourth point of contention also arose briefly in the debate. In September, Leader of the Greens Christine Milne asked Leader of the Government in the Senate Eric Abetz whether delivering weapons to the Kurds was legal under international law. Abetz initially avoided answering the question, by talking instead about the illegalities of the IS' actions. Upon further questioning, Abetz (2014b) 'assured' the Senate and the country that the government was 'clearly within the law' as it engaged in the 'hideous theatre' in Iraq. Again, Milne (2014c) asked whether the UN Security Council had passed a resolution authorising action, or if an official request from the Iraqi Government has been received by Australia at that time. Abetz addressed neither points, but instead asserted that Milne was trying to 'get a headline', and was wrong about the requirements of international law. He continued, 'We, as a nation, are joining with other peace-loving democracies in an attempt to lessen the huge horrific burden, indeed extinction, that some of these people are facing. I would have thought, as a minimum, we might have got unanimity from this place, and if not unanimity at least silence' (Abetz 2014b). This point, as with the three axes, again demonstrates the government's attitude towards dissenters or questioners of their policy, and further illuminates their commitment to perpetuating politically expedient cultural narratives.

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