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Dodson buries hatchet with the PM, but not Brough

Reconciled: John Howard, left, and Mick Dodson

Steve Lewis
Stuart Rintoul

ABORIGINAL leader Mick Dodson has backed John Howard as the ''best placed'' prime minister in Australia's history to achieve reconciliation, but says he has no confidence in the minister, Mal Brough.

One of Mr Howard's harshest critics, Mr Dodson yesterday called for a new national effort to improve indigenous life expectancy, including a massive investment of public money.

And he hailed Mr Howard — who turns 67 today and is still to announce whether he will contest next year's election — as holding the key to the success of the reconciliation push.

However, Mr Dodson said after the speech he could not work with the Indigenous Affairs Minister.

'What I want done can only be done by the Prime Minister, not his minister,'' he said.

Mr Dodson added that he preferred to talk to Mr Howard and made reference to a dispute with one of the minister's staff.

''What's the problem with that? I can talk to the boss about the cock-up with one of his staff,'' he said. ''This is a matter for the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister must lead this.''

Offering to back Mr Howard's reform agenda — but calling on him to acknowledge that the ''promising approach'' of mutual responsibility was not working — he told a reconciliation lunch in Melbourne: ''You, Prime Minister, may be the best-placed prime minister in Australia's history to do what needs to be done. This chance may never again come to pass for a very long time, if ever.''

Acknowledging their differences while emphasising a new willingness to work together, they came together, in the offices of BHP, to talk to business and indigenous leaders about what the ''next step'' should be towards reconciliation.

In his first major speech on reconciliation for a year, the Prime Minister said the Government's approach was ''very much guided by the spirit'' of the 1967 referendum, which granted Aborigines full rights as Australian citizens.

He called for a greater effort on education, arguing it offered the ''proven avenue of lasting hope for indigenous young people''.

''We need to foster a generation of indigenous Australians who recognise and reap the benefits of a good education and pass these values on to future generations,'' he said at the lunch, co-sponsored by Reconciliation Australia and BHP Billiton.

However, Aboriginal communities had to take responsibility for ensuring young indigenous people actually attended school. He said Canberra would establish a National Truancy Unit to monitor, analyse and report on the level of truancy in Aboriginal communities.

Mr Dodson said the Government's shared-responsibility framework — which imposes obligations on Aboriginal communities such as sending their children to school in return for government services — was ''struggling to deliver'' under the weight of bureaucracy and that COAG's indigenous working group should be extended beyond the public service.

''We'll back you,'' Mr Dodson said. But he warned that the Government needed to ''stop pretending'' that sufficient funds had ever been spent on indigenous Australia to make real progress.

''An investment in results means hundreds of millions of extra dollars every year for at least a decade and perhaps more,'' he said. ''We all know that.''

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Minister exposed on parrot

Ewin Hannan

FEDERAL Environment Minister Ian Campbell ignored explicit advice from his own department that stated a $220 million windfarm posed no obvious threat to an endangered parrot and should be approved.

Senator Campbell vetoed the project despite warnings from one of his top bureaucrats that using the orange-bellied parrot to stop the windfarm could have widespread ramifications for coastal development in four states.

The Department of Environment and Heritage told Senator Campbell on March 10 this year there did ''not appear to be direct evidence of any impact on the orange-bellied parrot'' from the Bald Hills windfarm, in Victoria's Gippsland.

The advice, written by department first assistant secretary Gerard Early, recommends Senator Campbell approve the windfarm subject to a range of standard conditions.

In supporting the windfarm, the department is believed to have rejected two other options.

The first was to approve the project provided its turbines were 2km from the coastline. The second option was to reject the proposal and ask the developer to resubmit an application that avoided any impact on the orange-bellied parrot.

It is believed Mr Early found that ''on balance'' these options were not supported by the department.

''Both of these approaches would represent a lowering of the previous threshold for unacceptable impact on the orange-bellied parrot, particularly as there does not appear to be direct evidence of any impact on the orange-bellied parrot at Bald Hills,'' he wrote.

The Australian understands Mr Early wrote that these options might be seen as inconsistent with the approach to other windfarms that have previously been approved at Portland in Victoria and Woolnorth and Musselroe Bay in Tasmania.

''It would have ramifications for all coastal development in western Tasmania, Victoria, southern NSW and southeast South Australia,'' he wrote.

''A consistent approach should be adopted for all development proposals in the orange-bellied parrot's migratory range and, as such, a lowering of the threshold may attract criticism in relation to other developments.''

Despite the advice, Senator Campbell rejected the proposal. On April 3 this year, he made a handwritten note on the advice: ''Proposed project not agreed.''

Senator Campbell informed the developer, a company called Wind Power, of his decision on April 4, provoking a political storm about whether the windfarm genuinely posed a threat to the parrot. It also sparked debate about the minister's performance and the Government's environmental approval process.

Victorian Planning Minister Rob Hulls said yesterday Senator Campbell's decision to ignore his own department was further evidence the windfarm — a hot political issue in the federal seat of McMillan during the 2004 election campaign — had been blocked for ''purely political reasons''.

''Senator Campbell has been exposed again,'' Mr Hulls said.

''Not only did he ignore the overwhelming evidence in his own, publicly available scientific reports that windfarms pose a negligible risk to the parrots, he also rejected his own department's recommendations.''

A spokeswoman for Senator Campbell last night released a statement, insisting he made his decision based on an independent report that found ''the impact of wind turbine collisions on the orange-bellied parrot, though small, could be sufficient to tip the balance against its continued existence''.

The report examined the impact on migratory birds of 23 current and proposed windfarms in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, showing the orange-bellied parrot was likely to be extinct within 50 years.

It showed the parrot did not regularly fly near Bald Hills, and predicted

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Beazley to win on uranium

Nigel Wilson
Imre Salusinszky

KIM Beazley's push to overturn Labor's two-decade ban on expanding uranium mining is likely to succeed, with senior powerbrokers confident a factional deal has been secured.

Key figures in the Right and the Centre factions are believed to have virtually guaranteed support for the Beazley motion.

It marks a return to the old-style factional deal-making, which had broken down over the past five years.

Some members of the Left who previously opposed mining now believe the debate has moved on since the 1980s. Labor's resources spokesman Martin Ferguson says the party's national conference next year will back Kim Beazley's U-turn on uranium and overturn the longstanding ''no new mines'' policy.

And Northern Territory chief minister Clare Martin, who campaigned on the existing policy at the last election, now says it is time to expand mining

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Civilians killed as Israelis target ambulances

Badly injured: Ahmed Mohammed Fawaz lost a leg in the attack on the ambulance in which he was being transported Picture: Innes Stewart

Holed: A destroyed ambulance roof

Meeting: Dr Rice with Mr Olmert in Jerusalem

Martin Chulov
Tyre

IT is meant to be a universally recognised symbol of neutrality and a guaranteed passage of protection for the victims of armed conflict.

But at least 10 Lebanese ambulances bearing the emblem of the international red cross have instead become targets in Israeli air strikes that have killed more than a dozen civilian passengers being transported to hospitals in the south of the country.

The latest attack occurred on Sunday night near the small village of Quna, where two ambulances travelling in convoy were fired on by an Israeli Apache helicopter as they sped to the besieged port city of Tyre.

One of the Israeli rockets pierced the centre of the large red cross marked on the roof of one of the ambulances, as if it was used as a target.

PM may send troops when fighting is over

Peter Wilson
Beirut

JOHN Howard said he would consider sending Australian troops to southern Lebanon as there was no sign yesterday of diplomacy ending the war between Israel and the Islamic extremist group Hezbollah.

The Prime Minister's comments came as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed more interest in the long-term results of the conflict than in seeking an immediate end to fighting, which has killed 391 in Lebanon and 42 Israelis.

''It is time for a new Middle East,'' Dr Rice said in Jerusalem.

Mr Howard said any Australian contribution to a peacekeeping force after the end of fighting would depend on the role and objective of the force. ''The problem in the Middle East is there is never an attempt to bring about a long-term settlement,'' he said.

While the UN and most foreign leaders have called for an end to hostilities, the US and some allies, including Australia, have backed Israel's desire to keep pounding Hezbollah militants who provoked the clashes, attacking Israeli soldiers.

Both ambulances' roofs were marked with crosses, blue lights flashed above them and giant International Red Cross flags flew from their rear doors. They were carrying members of the Fawaz family, who had been slightly injured during earlier bombing.

The convoy was struck by two rockets fired from an Apache helicopter, just before midnight, severely injuring all six people on board.

Ahmed Mohammed Fawaz lost his leg below his knee and will likely lose the other. His 14-year-old son Ahmed suffered serious wounds to his abdomen and the back of his head. He writhed in semi-conscious pain yesterday in the Jabal Amal hospital in Tyre as his mother, Jamila, lay unconscious nearby, her black hijab draped over stark white sheets and bandages.

In another ward, Qasin Shalin, the driver of the first ambulance, and the only one of six people to have escaped with light injuries, sat upright in bed, surrounded by the orange-clad men of Lebanon's Red Cross, who have come to be known as the country's bravest civil servants.

Only two of the region's estimated 60 ambulance crews have refused to turn up to work in the past week. One of the missing crews had narrowly escaped a missile themselves.

Mr Shalin was spared more serious injuries by the armoured vest he was wearing and the driver's canopy that protected him from a direct hit.

He remembers nothing after the flash and bang of the missile then the crunch of the crash as his ambulance veered off road.

Hospital officials in southern Lebanon have accused Israel of violating the Geneva convention by failing to respect the red cross symbol by attacking ambulances on at least 10 occasions in the two-week war that has claimed at least 12 more fire trucks and civil defence vehicles travelling between Tyre and the Israeli border.

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Call to arms: Jessica Rowe and Eddie McGuire yesterday

Eddie, Jessica hug for the cameras

Michael Bodey

AS the Seven Network closes the ratings and revenue gap, Nine boss Eddie McGuire yesterday orchestrated the ultimate publicity stunt, embracing the woman he plotted to sack.

''Let's put them out of their misery — come here,'' Mr McGuire joked as he closely hugged *Today* show host and mother-to-be Jessica Rowe.

The rapprochement occurred at an extravagant launch for advertisers of Nine's crucial summer programming schedule.

In the six months to June, the Seven Network closed to within $2 million of Nine's share, despite its Commonwealth Games ratings bonanza, escalating pressure on Nine's new season line-up.

The advertising result dulled Nine's launch of its new programs, dominated by a raft of new factual and historical programs, including *20 To 1* spin-offs *What A Year* and *The Big Question*, *The Great Weight Debate*, *Overhaul* and *50 Years 50 Stars*.

Rowe, whom McGuire is alleged to have prepared for the chopping block in a leaked affidavit by former Nine news chief Mark Llewellyn, continued to swat away any hint of tension.

''There's no dramas,'' she said. ''I'm very happy and Eddie's been very supportive.''

McGuire admitted that the past month's scrutiny was not unexpected.

''To think I was going to come off air as one of the highest-profile television people, hit Sydney and take over the Nine Network and not get a bit of a bollocking along the way, it just wasn't going to happen,'' he said.

''I hope now people have got that out of their system, we can get on with the actual business and have some objective criticism and analysis of what's going on.''

The star signing of the new season was cricket captain Ricky Ponting, who will be available ''exclusively'' to the network as part of a new contract.

But the signing immediately incurred the wrath of Cricket Australia.

Ponting admitted he was ''sure'' he would be retained exclusively by the network ''at different times'' during the upcoming Ashes series.

''But it won't be ridiculous,'' he said. ''If there's stuff that has to be done in my role as Australian captain, that'll happen.''

Cricket Australia last night said no player could sign an exclusive deal with a network.

''He can't do that,'' Cricket Australia public affairs manager Peter Young said last night. ''The approval for all these things (player media deals) is that they are non-exclusive.

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