Howard defends decision to go to war in Iraq

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Former prime minister John Howard has stood by his decision to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq, insisting he and fellow world leaders should not be judged with the benefit of hindsight.

Responding to a long-awaited British inquiry report into the Iraq War – now widely regarded as a strategic blunder – Mr Howard maintained it was the right thing to do with the information his government had at the time.

The Chilcot report, based on seven years’ work, concluded the invasion had been launched before the diplomatic options had been exhausted, and was based on flawed intelligence that “should have been” challenged but was not.

It was also critical of the occupation strategy after dictator Saddam Hussein had been toppled. But it did not back claims that intelligence had been doctored to justify the war.

Declaring “there was no lie” about the incorrect intelligence, Mr Howard said although no weapons of mass destruction were ever found, it was clear the Saddam regime wanted to resume its WMD program.

“Do I apologise for the decision that I took?” Mr Howard said at a news conference in Sydney. “I defend that decision. I don’t retreat from it. I don’t believe that, on the basis of the information that was available to me, it was the wrong decision. I really don’t.”

Later, on Sky News, Mr Howard said critics were enjoying the benefit of hindsight.

However, former Labor leader and Washington ambassador Kim Beazley, who took part in an Australian parliamentary inquiry into the war, said Labor had opposed the invasion because it was clear the Iraq regime had had no involvement in the September 11 terrorist attacks. “It is quite obvious that that was not the fight that needed to be fought at that time,” he said.

Independent MP Andrew Wilkie, who quit as a government intelligence analyst in 2003 over Mr Howard’s decision, said the invasion had ultimately allowed the so-called Islamic State to flourish and thereby led to the 2005 Bali bombing and the Lindt cafe siege. He called for a full Australian inquiry and said Mr Howard should face international war crimes trials.

Mr Howard branded these views “irrational” and “an absurd proposition”.

Other commentators said lessons needed to be learnt.

Peter Leahy, who was the chief of army from 2002 to 2008, said Australia needed better public and parliamentary debates about decisions to go to war, and a clearer focus on its strategic interests.

“Perhaps John Howard didn’t see...”

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“Don’t go to war... the best advice available at the time”

“Do we need to be much more independent, much more conscious of our own national interest, and conscious of who we choose to partner with, because the US doesn’t have a really good record over the last few decades,” said Professor Leahy, who heads the University of Canberra’s National Security Institute.

James Brown, a former army officer who served in Iraq and now is based at the US Studies Centre in Sydney, similarly said Australia had made too little effort to learn from the mistakes after the 2003 invasion. “This really points out by contrast that Australia’s debate on Iraq is frozen in the politics of 2003 and is still focused on apportioning blame rather than better equipping us to make future decisions on military action,” he said.