The coalition of the too-willing failed us all

War is a dreadful matter of life and death. The decision to send our people into harm’s way is the gravest one a government can make, a decision to be taken in the interests of national security with scrupulous honesty about necessity and objectives. The sad and terrible fact is that Australian governments have failed the nation. Since the fight for national survival that was World War II, we have marched into quagmires under the leadership of America, as members of coalitions of the too-willing.

This week Britain, searching for a new relationship with Europe, is having to confront the question of its relationship with the United States. Australia must do so too.

The Chilcot report, years in the making and 6000 pages long, has delivered a crushing verdict on Britain’s participation in the invasion of Iraq. Tony Blair, the prime minister who drove the decision, has responded by saying: “I express more sorrow, regret and apology than you can ever know or believe.” Yet, despite the clear evidence of deliberate exaggeration of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein, of deceit in his dealings with his own cabinet, of a determination to rush to war, Blair maintains that the decision was the right one.

But perhaps the most damning piece of evidence was found in secret letters between Blair and United States president George Bush. Blair told Bush: “I will be with you, whatever.” This was sycophancy and stupidity, a betrayal of Britain’s true national interest. John Howard, who drove Australia’s participation, sounded the same sorry note in 2003, when in an address to a think tank he revisited “the most controversial foreign policy decision taken by my government”. He said America’s insecurity since the terrorist attack on 9/11 “necessitated a 100 per cent ally, not a 70 per cent or 80 per cent one”. An unquestioning Howard did America a disservice; he did Australia a disservice.

The American alliance was given formal shape when an Australia, insecure after World War II, and desperate for a new great and powerful friend, moved with haste to fight as part of an American-led United Nations coalition in Korea.

The minister for external affairs, Percy Spender, having pressed for the commitment of ground troops, went calling on US president Harry Truman in search of a pact and came home with the ANZUS Treaty. Because of the alliance, Australia played its bit part in the Vietnam catastrophe. Because of the alliance, Australia went to an unwinnable war in Afghanistan and to a shambolic war in Iraq. Blair misled the British people about Iraq; Howard misled the Australian people about Iraq.

Reacting to the Chilcot report, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop this week said it was up to John Howard to decide whether to apologise for Australia’s involvement in the Iraq invasion. The decision, she said, was “based on information, the best information we had at the time”. This simply is not so. The Age revealed in 2004 that the primary military intelligence agency, the Defence Intelligence Organisation, had rejected the claim made by both Blair and Howard, as justification for going to war, that Iraq was a threat to the world because of its weapons of mass destruction. The head of the DIO, Frank Lewinçamp, gave a blunt reply to The Age’s question whether the magnitude of any threat was enough to justify the invasion of Iraq: “No”.

The Army chief at the time, Peter Leahy, this week stated Australia had blindly, and mistakenly, followed the US into Iraq. John Howard should, of course, apologise.

Bishop also said the government takes responsibility for the decisions the government makes. What an Australian government, Liberal or Labor, should do, is to take responsibility for a mature re-examination of the American alliance: no blind following; no surrendering of Australia’s true national interests; a question and a willingness to say “no”.

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