

## Whole-Wheat Alex

A vital part of the neo-liberal philosophy espoused by the Howard Government is the importance of competition. Despite this credo, and despite the efforts of many Australian wheat growers to challenge the monopoly of the Australian Wheat Board, the idea of there being anything of a competitive nature in the marketing of Australian wheat is merely a fantasy. This may not in itself be a bad thing, but it exposes the hypocrisy of a government which has been hell-bent on destroying those monopolies which have been owned by the taxpayers, wherever it suited their mates.

The big problem with monopolies is that they are more susceptible to incompetence than those businesses which have to compete. It is doubtful, however, whether it is only incompetence that has responsible for the ludicrous spectacle over the past three or four days at the Cole Commission of Inquiry into the doings of the AWB. The managing director's amnesia in the face of questions concerning bribes and the inflating of prices to cover up secret payments, and his apparent ignorance of what the AWB was up to between 2000 and 2003.

What it was up to, as we now know, was providing hundreds of millions of dollars to the regime of Saddam Hussein. In the years leading up to the Second World War we had "Pig-Iron Bob" Menzies, the federal minister who attacked the wharfies of Port Kembla because they refused to load ships which were taking to Japan materials which the knew would be used for the Japanese war machine. This iron came back to kill many Australians in the form of weapons. It now seems we might have "Whole-Wheat Alex" Downer, because the situation has some parallels.

The role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in this scandal is being investigated as I write this, and evidence has been presented that the Minister, Downer, discussed the Iraq deals with the AWB on a number of occasions.

The imposition of economic sanctions on Iraq was seen by many people as little more than a softening up of that country in preparation for a war which had been planned long in advance of the so-called "weapons of mass destruction" furore. The sanctions caused great harm to the people of that unfortunate country, according to some estimates causing the deaths of more Iraqis, especially of children, than all Saddam Hussein's brutality.

Nevertheless, they were imposed by the United Nations, and Australia was an eager party to them. Now it seems that the Federal Government's hypocrisy is evident not only in its selective attitude towards monopolies in business, but in its apparent connivance at the breaking of UN sanctions. How much of the \$300 million paid to Saddam Hussein was spent on arming those against whom Australia was about to send its troops?

Saddam Hussein was once a "good guy". That was when he was fighting Iran or when he was subjugating the Kurds at a time when they were getting too uppity for comfort. It now appears that he was "good" enough even as late as early 2003, a matter of weeks before the war started, as long as somebody was making a profit. War is seen by our leaders as a sometimes necessary evil, but it is never so evil that the right person in the right place at the right time can't make a dodgy dollar out of it.