



Source: Richard Beeston and Ramita Navai, 'Russia last hope in Iran standoff', *The Times* in *The Australian online*, 07/02/06.

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'I was only thinking of the starving Iraqis'.

Michael Long, a senior executive with the AWB continued: 'There is a soup, made from lamb and wheat, with the consistency of porridge, which is back in fashion in Iraq, in the region north of Baghdad, as a breakfast dish. Those who cannot afford meat make it with wheat alone.

'Soak the grain in water overnight. Cover the lamb bones and meat with water in a large saucepan. Bring to the boil and remove scum. Drain and rinse the wheat and drop it into the boiling meat stock. Add salt and pepper and cinnamon and simmer gently for at least two hours, stirring occasionally and adding water until it is very soft. Remove bones and crush meat with a fork. Serve hot in deep bowls, sprinkled, if you like with sizzling hot butter or oil. In Iraq they sprinkle with sugar and cinnamon.'

'Yes. Very nice. I've tried it', said John Agius, QC, the terrifyingly effective senior counsel assisting the enquiry. 'I don't think you are being entirely candid with the commission, however. We all know that to have been a popular dish in 1968, when Claudia Roden published her ground-breaking *Book of Middle Eastern Food*. And, yes—the AWB has been exporting wheat to Iraq since 1948. But that is all past history. That was before the sanctions. We are concerned with the time of the oil-for-food program, and what the Iraqis were doing with Australian wheat during that time.'

For the first four days of the Cole Inquiry into what is proving to be the biggest trade scandal Australia has faced, the managing director of AWB, Andrew Lindbergh's denials had been roundly demolished.

Agius asked him directly, 'Wasn't it common knowledge that they were making scones and other breads, batters and cakes from recipes supplied by the AWB?'

At this point Terence Cole interjected, as he did a number of times during the proceedings to suggest the witness 'think very carefully' about his answers.

'I can't recall', Lindbergh answered.

In four days of testimony before the commission, Lindbergh repeated 'I don't know.' 'I don't recall', at least 200 times.

At one point, Agius looked him right in the eye, and said: 'It's ridiculous to suggest that you did not know, Mr. Lindberg. Are you a complete fool?'

The question yet to be answered is: did AWB hide the truth from the Howard government?

At this point in the proceedings, Prince Charles who was in the gallery interjected. Terence Cole did not move to stop him.

'Say whatever you like, make yourself happy. But everyone knows that dish would not have been the same without meat. And the Iraqis would have used mutton not lamb. In Britain, the availability of year round lamb has led to mutton becoming unfashionable and getting a reputation for being cheap and tough. And yet the Iraqis use it. Today, I am announcing the launch of the Mutton Renaissance Club which will combine those who produce, process and sell the meat. We haven't decided yet, if this will include having a single desk. A number of celebrity chefs in Britain and across the Commonwealth, who appreciate the qualities of this dish have joined the battle

for greater acceptance and tolerance of mutton in developed nations in the West.'

Prince Charles made this last comment with a nodding acknowledgement to Jamie Oliver, Stephanie Alexander and Graham Kerr ('The Galloping Gourmet') who were also in the gallery.

At that point, John Agius, brought things back into line, continuing his questioning of Lindbergh.

'Isn't it true that the wheat Australia exports to Iraq, is commonly thought of as being hard wheat, unsuitable for bread making flour, or indeed for scones. But that is in fact not the case.'

'I never knew. I'd only just joined the company, and I had a million things to deal with. I never went into it', Lindberg answered.

Agius then read him a memo on AWB letterhead that said: 'You have to rub the butter into the flour with your fingertips', but Lindberg said he didn't know what it meant.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade officials in Canberra and New York were warned about allegations of bribes or kickbacks as far back as 2000 but conducted only cursory investigations.

When the United Nation's Volker report was released last October naming AWB as the largest single supplier of illicit culinary information to Saddam's corrupt regime, Howard said that AWB executives—most of whom have some farming background and get around in Akubras and RM Williams boots—had always seemed 'a very straight up and down group of people.

'I can't, on my knowledge and understanding of the people involved, imagine for a moment they would have knowingly been involved in anything improper', Howard said.

And yet as Michael Long said to the commission of enquiry last week: 'It was all about looking after the Australian wheat farmer as well as the starving Iraqis. If you sell people our wheat, you've got to tell them what works best with it—you know, how much moisture to add, oven temperatures etc. Otherwise they will go elsewhere. And the Americans have recipes coming out their ears—they've got support programs in place. We didn't think we were doing anything wrong. It's the way business was done.'

Speaking on ABC's *Lateline* last night, the leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, said 'at the very least it was negligent incompetence on the part of the government'. That they should have 'looked into the allegations, and instead of the AWB giving Saddam recipes, the government should have been selling them Australian mutton (hogget or two-tooth). It would have been a win-win—we would have made more money, they could have cooked what they like. All around, it would have been a more varied and balanced diet'. Executives from the Australian Meat Industry agreed with this analysis.

The Cole enquiry continues tomorrow.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Robyn McKenzie.*

*Text drawn from newspaper reports and other printed sources.*