David Koch:

Defence Minister Brendan Nelson joins us now. Minister, good morning to you. Now, our troops are in a very similar situation, aren't they? They're in a quiet province of Iraq, we'd sort of already handed over to their security forces, we're there just as back-up, why shouldn't we be pulling them out, like Tony Blair is?

Dr Nelson:

Well, Kochie, what you just heard reported from London is essentially what our troops have been doing for more than six months. And yes, you're right, it's relatively quiet, it's quieter than Basra, which is quieter than Baghdad, but we still have a job to do in making sure that the Iraqi security forces that we've been training, are well and truly up to the plate of being able to provide support, not only through the two provinces Australia's looking after, but of course across in Maysan and Basra.

It's probably also important to point out too, David, that what the British are doing is, they're going from 7100 to 5500 troops, and we knew they'd do that for about six months, and then if conditions are right, they'll go down to about just under 5000, and stay at that level until Australia, the United States and all of the other countries, believe that the Iraqis can essentially look after their own security.

So it's not a withdrawal, but what they're doing is following the footsteps of Australia in the two provinces we're already looking after, and as you know, you've visited them yourself, and if those things are going well, they'll keep
that force at somewhere between 4500 and 5000, until eventually we all decide that it's time the Iraqis can look after themselves.

**David Koch:**

OK, so what's the process of deciding that the Iraqis can look after themselves, because Tony Blair's obviously said, hey, it is getting a lot better? Who makes that decision? Do they come to us and say, fellas, you can go home now, or do we make that decision, and if we make the decision, what do we base it on?

**Dr Nelson:**

Well, it's a good question, David, and it's a question of judgement. I think it's very hard to define it, and that's why, for example, we don't set a specific date. But you know it when you get there, where for example we handed over to the Iraqis control for their security in Al-Muthanna in July, and then Dhi Qar, which is the other province our diggers are looking after, back in October. Now so far it's going reasonably well, the Iraqis have had some firefight with insurgents, and with the Baghdad security plan, we'll be interested to see what impact it may have in the south.

We're also continually ramping up our training of the Iraqis, not just in combat, but actually how to run their army, provide medical support, provide engineering support to the Iraqi people, so we need to give it quite a bit of time, to make sure that when we go, that we're able to go confidently.

**David Koch:**

So when you say quite a bit of time, what are we looking at, six months, a year, what do you reckon?

**Dr Nelson:**

Well, it's hard to define, David. Sometimes in the media you feel like the kids in the back seat, saying, are we there yet? Look, there are 18 provinces in Iraq, Baghdad and Al Anbar account for 60 per cent of the violence, Basra has been very difficult. So we've got two of these provinces, two of the 18 have gone to Iraqi control, Najaf is a third. The British have got two, Maysan as we've just heard, and Basra, so it'll need to take a bit of time to make sure that we don't just bail out prematurely and leave these people to their own devices.
**David Koch:**

OK. Dick Cheney, Vice President, US Vice President, arrives in Australia today for talks. You're going to catch up with him. If he asks for more troops to be sent to Iraq, will you comply?

**Dr Nelson:**

Well, we're certainly not going to be sending more troops to Iraq, David, late last year when I had discussions with the British, the Iraqis, Nouri al-Maliki, the Prime Minister of Iraq, and indeed the Americans, they all said, look, Australia is absolutely first rate, but especially in training, so maybe we could think about more trainers, and that's exactly what we've done.

**David Koch:**

All right. You say you won't send more to Iraq, you are going to send more to Afghanistan, is that an indication that things aren't working out there?

**Dr Nelson:**

I won't speak in any detail about reports I've seen in the newspapers today, but we are very concerned about the activities of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, we brought our special forces and commandos back in late September last year, and we've got 400 tradies and engineers and infantry over there at the moment, working with 1600 Dutch. What I have decided to do, and the government's agreed to, is to send a small scoping group over to Afghanistan to have a very close look at it. Afghanistan and Iraq are connected, David, in that the people that we are fighting are not only fanatically anti-American, they are fanatically opposed to countries that are open to other human beings, that support the education and fair treatment of women, and they want to build a violent political Utopia, having hi-jacked Islam. It's very important we prevail, it's hard for us in Australia to see it, but it's essential that we prevail, and if we do have to send more troops in- -

**David Koch:**

While we're in a quiet province in Iraq, in Afghanistan it's a bit different, isn't it? We're in the thick of it, we're in one of the last of the regions to try and clean out the Taliban, it's getting a bit hot there.
Dr Nelson:

Well, it's extremely important, and yes, it is a bit hot, our people are doing - as you know, you've seen it, they're doing a magnificent job, but we are always concerned for their safety. I'm a bit concerned. If you describe the Taliban as weeds, I'm a bit concerned the weeds are starting to grow again up in those sanctuaries, and the places in Central and Northern Oruzgan, so we just want to have a very close look at this, we've talked to the Dutch about it, I've also had a talk to the British Defence Secretary, and also to Secretary Gates about it in the US.

David Koch:

OK. Brendan Nelson, thanks for joining us, appreciate it.

Dr Nelson:

Thank you, David.

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