



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

**Afghanistan**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 2 February 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Bishop, Julie, MP

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**Ms JULIE BISHOP** (Curtin) (9.15 pm)—In historic terms, Afghanistan has been called the graveyard of empires, due in large part to the fierce resistance of the population to the presence of various international forces over the centuries. There are many examples where the forces within Afghanistan have refused to be subdued by the world's great powers. In the 13th century Genghis Khan was reportedly forced to negotiate terms favourable to the Afghans to ensure his armies could traverse the country. In the 19th century there were the Anglo-Afghan wars and the terrible story of more than 16,000 British soldiers and civilians killed while trying to flee Kabul. More recently, in the 1980s, there was the withdrawal of Soviet troops after years of guerrilla warfare.

Therein lie the lessons for the current NATO-led mission in Afghanistan. It is very difficult to achieve a decisive military victory against a determined insurgent force that is able to find safe haven among the civilian population by hiding in the rugged terrain and in the neighbouring country. The stakes in Afghanistan are very high. It is unthinkable for the Taliban to once again rule the nation and provide safe haven for al-Qaeda terrorist training camps. The images of commercial passenger planes being deliberately crashed into the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon are as shocking today as they were on that terrible New York morning on 11 September 2001. Terrorists directly trained by al-Qaeda, or inspired by its sick ideology, have been responsible for many horrific attacks around the world, including against Australians. As the foreign minister noted, more than 100 Australians have been killed by terrorists in recent years.

The decision taken by the partners of the International Security Assistance Force to intervene militarily in Afghanistan was to destroy the terrorist infrastructure and the training camps in which thousands of people have been trained to carry out attacks. This necessarily involved the overthrow of the Taliban, which had hosted the terrorist organisation of Osama bin Laden.

Since that time, the International Security Assistance Force has been focused on providing stability and security to a nation shattered by decades of conflict. The task of reconstruction remains daunting and, while there have been great gains, much remains to be done. There is also the task of building the capacity of the local Afghan people to provide for their own security through armed forces and police. The Afghan government is also being supported to build the institutions to enable the nation to achieve long-term stability. I welcome Australia's contribution to the Peace and Reintegration Fund, which will be used to support and negotiate a settlement with people who are willing to renounce violence and extremism and make a constructive contribution to Afghanistan. I note the foreign minister's reassurances that the fund will be used appropriately. However, all Australians would expect to see strict guidelines for its use, to ensure there is no possibility of any funding being diverted to support the insurgency.

The coalition also welcomes the further commitment of funds to such initiatives as mine clearing, agricultural development, reconstruction, the promotion of human rights and the increase in Australian civilian and diplomatic personnel. I note that, although the government set aside \$3 million for a feasibility study into the construction of an embassy in Kabul last May, there has been no public statement on progress. I hope that, given the additional commitments, this will progress as soon as possible.

I pay tribute to the work of Australia's troops and civilians working in a dangerous environment in support of the Afghan people. However, despite their efforts the security situation remains fragile. Attacks have been launched against various targets throughout Afghanistan in recent weeks, including the suicide bombing which targeted CIA agents. Yesterday, militants in north-west Pakistan reportedly attacked and destroyed a tanker attempting to deliver fuel to the NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Against this background, it is worth noting that Afghani president Hamid Karzai announced recently that he would seek to establish a council to support peace and reconciliation talks with militants. President Karzai has said that the national council for peace, reconciliation and reintegration will consist of government officials and tribal elders. He has called for an end to violence, with militants rejoining mainstream society. Importantly, President Karzai urged the Taliban leadership to drop the condition that NATO forces leave the country before

entering peace talks. He reminded the Taliban that international forces were in Afghanistan to ensure extremists do not regain control of the country and that the international forces will remain until that objective can be met.

It is vital that the Australian government not set artificial timelines for the withdrawal of troops. The Taliban would use any such timeline, regardless of how far into the future, to promote its cause among the Afghan people. As I have related previously, I was told during my visit to Afghanistan in July last year that a militant had said to a US soldier that, while the soldier might have the fancy wristwatch, the Taliban have the time. Putting an end date for withdrawal would greatly encourage the Taliban. Debate about artificial timelines for withdrawal is also damaging to the efforts of our people in Afghanistan, because the local people remain sceptical that the international forces will remain in the country for the long term. After all, they have seen others come and go over the years. Local people are naturally very concerned about their future security after the international force's withdrawal. The Taliban use that prospect as a weapon to convince local communities to remain on their side.

The ongoing evolution of this strategy in Afghanistan reveals the folly of the Labor Party policy in relation to Iraq in 2004 and the infamous Mark Latham line 'troops home by Christmas'. The militants have been active in Afghanistan for a very long time and have many deep links with tribal leaders, so we should not give any comfort to the Taliban.

Given the size of its commitment, the United States is the critical contributor to the International Security and Assistance Force. It is greatly encouraging to learn of the announcement by President Obama of an additional \$33 billion this financial year, which will be used to fund an increase in troops from the United States. The surge is reportedly based on the successful surge of troops in Iraq, which resulted in a dramatic decrease in the levels of violence and attacks by insurgents.

One of the keys to the decline in violence in Iraq was the successful promotion of awakening councils, which involved the local population in no longer harbouring insurgents and forming armed groups to battle militants within their midst. The challenge in Afghanistan is, if anything, greater than in Iraq because of the drastically lower standards of literacy and education. Afghanistan also lacks many of the institutions necessary for the functioning of a civilian government. The key to success in Afghanistan is, to use a well-worn phrase, to win the hearts and minds of the people. Part of this is to convince the Taliban that the international forces remain committed to the original task. It also involves winning the trust of the broader Afghan community that the international forces will not abandon them to the clutches of extremists and al-Qaeda or related jihadi groups. It involves building the trust of the people that corruption within the Afghan government can be reduced or, hopefully, eliminated. The Afghan people also need reassurance that other nations will not desert them after they take control of their own security needs. The Afghan people must be confident that they will be supported in coming decades as they slowly rebuild their shattered nation.

The primary goal of the International Security Force is to enable Afghanistan to stand as an independent nation, responsible for its own affairs and with the capacity to provide a secure and peaceful environment for its citizens. The Afghans are like people all over the world in that the vast majority want to live in peace and to have the opportunity to build a better life for themselves and their families. Between the First World War and the Soviet war in 1979, Afghanistan, although very poor with a rudimentary economy, did enjoy decades of continuous peace under its then existing national defence forces. The ongoing development of Afghanistan was set back decades after the devastation that occurred during the Soviet occupation. National development was set back even further under the brutal medieval rule of the Taliban. Based on its harsh interpretation of Sharia law, women and girls were particularly disadvantaged during this time. Afghanistan has a long way to go in terms of meeting the challenges of being a robust, peaceful, independent nation. However, I remain confident that it can lift itself out of the quagmire of past misfortune if the nations of the world remain committed to long term support.