



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Dutton, Peter, MP

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Mr DUTTON (Dickson) (6.27 pm)—Many views will be heard in this debate but the most important message is to our enemy. So to those who seek to terrorise and impose an ideology on us and our friends, our message is clear: know that, with all our might, our country and this parliament will continue to provide unquestionable support to our troops. Our country is forged on principles that arm us with the determination to defeat our enemy—principles of decency, perseverance, respect and resolve. These are some of the characteristics in the make-up of our men and women in uniform. And that, in the main, is why our nation can be confident of success. Importantly, these are characteristics we share with our main allies: the people of the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Canada, amongst others. We can be proud of our friendship with those nations and others, and we take the opportunity to strengthen, not diminish, that relationship. We reaffirm that commitment today.

Our troops are right to be in Afghanistan and they were right to be in Iraq. It is right that they were in East Timor. It is right that they will participate in future missions that are in the national security interests of this country. Given the troubled history of Afghanistan, only long after this chapter has closed will we be armed with all the facts that will enable us to form a true judgment of the current offensive. The men and, in particular, the women of Afghanistan deserve to live a free life and to at least give the next generation a chance. For generations they have lived in troubled times. They have lived with hope and despair and they must today be questioning whether our current occupation will stay the course; whether their future should be viewed more optimistically or whether a return to the barbaric behaviour of their oppressors is imminent.

In January 2002 I was in the United States for a Young Leaders Dialogue and I took the opportunity to visit New York City. It was indeed my first trip to New York and to the country. Right across the country people were reeling from the callous attacks only four months prior. Viewing the site where the Twin Towers had stood was sobering, and the feeling of heightened patriotism was palpable right across the country. People around these debates often conveniently forget the impact on the American psyche of those early days.

One person who understood that sentiment well was John Howard. He was, of course, on the ground at the time of the September 11 atrocities, and there is no question that this shaped his response and ultimately the response of our country. But importantly it strengthened our relationship with the United States. Our relationship with the United States and the way in which we view the world and the way in which we will do so in the future is absolutely crucial to this debate. When Robert Gordon Menzies signed the ANZUS agreement in San Francisco in September 1951 it embodied much of what our two nations are about, the history that we shared together and the way in which our history will be made in years to come. Our two countries share common purposes and that is part of the reason why we are fighting alongside the Americans in Afghanistan at the moment. We have to recognise that our future is dependent in many ways upon those strong security ties with the United States and the United Kingdom, with other NATO allies and with people within our own region. We have to recognise that it is in our national interest to be in Afghanistan alongside our friends. As part of this debate, the need for that continued presence will be underscored to the Australian people.

We have to fight terrorism at every turn. We have been blessed in this country that we have not been given up to the same atrocities that occurred in September 2001. We were of course touched by Bali, and at other times around the world Australians have been killed in callous terrorist attacks. So we have one eye on that current danger but also one eye on what might lie ahead. Many people make predictions about what the next 50 or 100 years will hold militarily in our region or by way of security risk to our country, but in the end nobody knows. The insurance that we have in place, the peace of mind that we have knowing that we are allied with some of the best people in the world, must be recognised as part of this debate.

We have to recognise that this is a debate about the Afghans and their future and the future of many people within the region, not the least of whom being the Pakistanis. There is great volatility in that country right now and there will be in the future, particularly if we were to have a premature exit from Afghanistan. We have to recognise the incredible importance of security in other parts of the Middle East. We have to make sure that we protect the interests, and the security interests in particular, of our friends in Israel. We have to make sure that

we fight terrorism at every turn, particularly where the breeding grounds have been in the past and where they will germinate in the future if we do not continue the course that we are currently on.

We have to make sure that this remains a bipartisan position in our country. Many people on both sides of this debate and from both sides of this parliament have expressed different views, but in the end there is an abiding bipartisan approach to our military and strategic interests, both in the present day and into the future. We have to make sure that the Labor Party continues its fine tradition of support of the situation that we find ourselves in with our allies. I believe one of the current threats in our country as we look forward over the next decade or two is a lurching to the left, which I think would be a grave mistake by the ALP. If they were to believe that, for political purposes, they will be drawn to the left by the Greens—and this is very much a contemporary debate—that would be a great mistake for the Labor Party, past, present and future. That is a debate that they will have internally. These are issues that have received bipartisan support and they must do so in the future. Nobody should bring into question those alliances and nobody must abandon what is ultimately going to be in the best interests of our country.

Much of this debate is centred on the men and women in our uniform in Afghanistan and the enormous sacrifice that many of them have made but, importantly, that their families have made as well. I have a large presence in my electorate of Defence Force families in areas like Eatons Hill and Albany Creek, around Bray Park, Warner, Samford and otherwise across the electorate. These are thoroughly decent people and families. As I said in my opening remarks, they embody much of what we are as Australians. They are proud to see their mums and dads go off to fight for and defend their country. They are of course anxious, as loved ones, about the safety and security of those that they hold near and dear, but in the end they are comforted, at least to some degree, in knowing that these are fine people and the finest that we can put on the front line to defend the interests of this country by fighting terrorism where it breeds and making sure that the long-term safety of our country is intact. We talk to these families and we see them on occasions at local schools. We see them as part of the RSLs and sub-branches, like the Bray Park sub-branch and the Kallangur sub-branch of the RSL within my own electorate—the fine people who have fought in past conflicts, who support their brothers and sisters in the current conflict, who will always have at the core of who they are what is in the best interests of this nation and who will always defend the right of our country to engage in conflicts which are in the long-term interests of this country. So, whilst this debate is about the present conflict in Afghanistan, it is very much about what is going to serve us well into the future.

We need to make sure that our focus remains on the needs of our troops in the field. We need to make sure not only that they receive the best training in the world but that they receive adequate resources, and that is of course something that both sides of politics support. We supported it when we were in government and I know the current government supports it as well. Where there are problems and glitches from time to time, where there are extra demands made, then we should be generous in our approach to granting those extra resources, because these are men and women who fight in our name. They fight to protect who we are. They fight to protect who we are going to be into the future. So I want to say to those young students right across the electorate who have mums and dads in Afghanistan at the moment: be very proud of who they are. It is difficult when they are away from you for so long, but know in your hearts that the work that they are doing in Afghanistan makes us as a nation very proud. As a son or daughter of one of those serving men or women you too should be equally proud of who your mum or dad is and the work that they do.

It is tragic that we have lost lives in Afghanistan and in recent conflicts in Iraq and other parts of the world. That is the sad reality that goes with having to defend one's nation and one's honour. So we need to ensure that we maintain a level of respect in this debate whilst always honouring the great character of those men and women who don the Australian uniform. We have to make sure that ultimately we as a parliament and as a people are acting in the nation's interests. I believe very strongly that by our presence in Afghanistan we are doing two things. Firstly, we are fighting terrorism and the evil scourge that it is, not just for the betterment of our own country but for countries in the Middle East as well. Secondly, we are strengthening our relationship with the United States, which is incredibly important for the future of this country.

Nobody 10 years ago could possibly have imagined the terrible circumstances that played out in September 2001 in the United States and the countless terrorist attacks since on embassies or national assets around the world. We need to make sure that we stay the course, that we do not discredit those who have lost their lives in Afghanistan by leaving early. I strongly believe that if we were to cut and run from Afghanistan now, as some advocate, we would not be doing the service required to those people who in recent months and years, since our engagement in this conflict, have given up their lives and made the ultimate sacrifice.

In closing, as I said at the start, ours today is a very strong message to the enemy of this country and to the enemy of friends of our country. We will not be persuaded to change the course from what is right. As a nation we have always stood for what is best in humanity. We want to provide a bright future for the people of Afghanistan. We want to provide certainty for people as best we can, not only in the Middle East but around the world. I believe we are making a significant contribution as a country and I believe that into the future our country will be well served by our action in Iraq and also in Afghanistan. If we are to provide a brighter future, particularly for women in that region, then it is absolutely essential that we redouble our efforts and make sure that we continue the bipartisan approach. That is something that I am personally committed to and that I know the coalition is thoroughly committed to. We will not give in to those who seek to destroy what we are.