



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

Thursday, 28 October 2010

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Questioner
Speaker Zappia, Tony, MP

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Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (12.22 pm)—I too welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate relating to Australia's military engagement in Afghanistan. I begin by conveying my condolences to the families, friends and colleagues of the 21 Australians killed while serving Australia in Afghanistan. I also record my appreciation and respect for Australia's ADF personnel who are serving or who have served in Afghanistan. They quite rightly deserve the recognition given to them by all members of this House so far.

For a nation to engage in military conflict is as grave a decision as a nation can ever make, and therefore the national parliament, the democratically elected body of the Australian people, should have a right to express its views on the matter. Views expressed in the midst of a conflict, however, must be expressed with caution and with sensitivity—with caution because the debate will clearly signal the current thinking of the nation's political leaders to our allies, our adversaries and our defence personnel serving in Afghanistan. Conflict is as much about psychology as it is about resources. We must act with sensitivity because we have serving defence personnel in Afghanistan risking their lives to serve their government and their country. We must also act with sensitivity because we have families and friends grieving over the death of those defence personnel who were killed in Afghanistan or grieving for those who have been injured and have had their lives changed for ever.

The greatest respect that we can pay to the 21 Australian Defence Force members who have been killed in Afghanistan is to remain true to the cause for which they lost their lives. Some time ago when asked by a journalist about my hopes for 2010, I listed the end of the war in Afghanistan as one of my key hopes. We have been in Afghanistan since 2001. It has been a long engagement. Accurate figures are not available, but on most accounts tens of thousands of lives have been lost and many, many more have been injured. The human toll has been immense and will continue to rise as the conflict continues.

The financial toll has equally been huge. For the people of Afghanistan, almost a decade of productivity and economic development has been lost by this war alone, not to mention the two previous decades of war. Many young Afghan people have known nothing but war for their entire lives. For Australians, so distant from Afghanistan, it is easy to become insensitive to the life of the Afghan people. But they are real people, fellow humans with families, with fears, aspirations and hopes who also feel pain and sorrow. The country has been in conflict for the past three decades, so an end to the war would bring so much good to so many people in so many countries.

The current conflict is now in its ninth year, and I have little doubt that the situation in Afghanistan today is considerably different to what it was in 2001. Our core national security mission in Afghanistan, however, has not changed. The questions today are: has it been accomplished; and has our purpose for being in Afghanistan now changed?

In the *Australian* newspaper on 14 October Peter Leahy, director of the National Security Institute at the University of Canberra, and Chief of Army between 2002 and 2008, described Australia's national security interest as being:

... freedom from attack, maintenance of territorial integrity and political sovereignty, preservation of our hard-won freedoms and economic prosperity for all Australians.

Peter Leahy goes on to say:

These ends can be achieved by using diplomatic, economic, military and soft power.

It is with the changed circumstances in Afghanistan in mind, and with the options available to us in achieving our national security objectives, that I believe we should reassess the nature of our engagement there.

Our mission has not changed, but our strategy to achieve that mission should always be open to debate. My assessment is based on the ministerial statements made in this House, the reports of independent international

commentators and the daily news reports of events in Afghanistan. I do not have access to the Defence or security intelligence which others obviously do. If I did have that, it may cause me to see the situation differently.

At the time that we went into Afghanistan in 2001 our mission was to target al-Qaeda operations there and the Taliban government that provided al-Qaeda with cover. I understand that al-Qaeda no longer has safe havens or training camps in Afghanistan. I also understand that al-Qaeda operations have spread to other countries. The Afghanistan war clearly began as a counterterrorism mission. Today, however, our mission is more about stabilising a country that appears to be in turmoil and ensuring that there is not a resurgence of al-Qaeda operations there.

If stability is not restored in Afghanistan, Australia will continue to be burdened by the problems of Afghanistan in more ways than by being engaged in a war and fearing the resurgence of al-Qaeda. Since the conflict began, around 8,000 Afghan people have sought refuge in Australia as boat arrivals. When they arrive here they are vilified and rejected by many of the very people who justify Australia's engagement in Afghanistan by arguing that we are liberating the Afghan people. Their concern for Afghan people quickly evaporates when the Afghan people reach our shores.

Much has been made of the global fight against terror, and I want to comment briefly on terrorism. The terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September 2001 and the Bali bombings on 12 October 2002 have been linked to terrorists trained in Afghanistan. I accept that that was the case. I know only too well the effect those attacks had on the lives of the families and loved ones of those killed.

Nineteen-year-old Angela Golotta, whom I knew and with whose family I have had a long friendship, was killed in the Bali bombings. Andrew Knox, a close political friend and colleague, was killed in the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. I attended both of their funeral services. In fact, it was a funeral service for Angela; for Andrew it was a memorial service held in Adelaide. Both services were overflowing with people; in fact, not everyone could fit into the venues. I think those two services will remain with me forever. It is difficult to describe the emotion and the feeling you have when you speak to the father of Angela Golotta about how he raced down to the hotel that was bombed and searched for his daughter. It is difficult to describe the feelings you have when you listen to the stories of Andrew trying to escape the building he was in at the time it was attacked.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms K Livermore)—Order! The debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting. The member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.