



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

Monday, 15 November 2010

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Questioner
Speaker Zappia, Tony, MP

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Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (4.12 pm)—In continuing my remarks on this matter, I will pick up from where I left off. At the time I was making the point that our engagement in Afghanistan is often linked to the attack on the Twin Towers and the Bali bombings. I was specifically making the point that I knew Angela Golotta, who was killed in the Bali bombings. I know her family, and I know the trauma that the death caused her family. I also knew Andrew Knox, a young Australian who was killed in the Twin Towers attack. Andrew and I were political colleagues and friends and worked on campaigns on a number of occasions in the Makin electorate, which I represent today. In referring to both of them, I know and understand full well the strong links and passions that some members have in respect of our engagement in Afghanistan and both of those attacks. It is also my understanding that more Australians have now been killed in terrorist attacks on the West than those from any other Western country other than the United States. So, quite rightly, our engagement in Afghanistan is as much about protecting Australia's people and interests as it is about supporting the US.

Today Afghanistan is one of the most impoverished nations in the world. According to the Australian Council for International Development, Afghanistan ranks second last at No. 181 of 182 countries on the UN's Human Development Index. It is the most food insecure country on the planet. Less than 30 per cent of its people have access to safe drinking water and more than 90 per cent do not have access to proper sanitation. The average life expectancy for an Afghan woman is 44 years. Every 29 minutes, a woman dies during childbirth. Maternal mortality rates are estimated to be the third highest in the world at 1,600 per 100,000 live births. Literacy rates, at 26 per cent of the total population, are the fourth lowest in the world. One in four children die before the age of five.

The human and financial toll caused by three decades of fighting and destruction is immeasurable. If the same efforts had gone into addressing the level of disadvantage as have gone into the engagement in Afghanistan, the country may well be much different today than it is, and it may well not be as vulnerable as it is today.

The Afghanistan war began as a war on terrorism; however, I believe that that is no longer the focus of our presence there. So why are we still there? We are still there because we were party to overthrowing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and we cannot leave until an alternative, stable government is in place. To do otherwise would leave the people of Afghanistan at the mercy of those who would quite likely not treat them well. We are there because, having disrupted al-Qaeda operations there, we must ensure that a future Afghanistan government does not again provide a cover for terrorist training or a refuge for terrorists. These are valid reasons for Australia's continued presence in Afghanistan. I am deeply concerned, however, that there is no end to the war in sight and that our ADF members could be in Afghanistan until 2014 or possibly for the rest of this decade.

I am also concerned that reports about progress made are countered by other reports which describe a worsening situation. What is now needed is international aid and a continuation of the training, mentoring and equipping of the Afghan army and police so that they can build their own capability.

The Taliban is not al-Qaeda and, according to several respected commentators, engaging the Taliban in constructive discussions may prove more successful in bringing an end to the war than continuing the military action against them. The member for Werriwa clearly articulated this in his contribution to this debate. Peter Leahy's options of diplomacy, economic, military and soft power should all be part of Australia's strategy in our future engagement in Afghanistan.

In summary, our engagement in the Afghanistan war is not about human rights or liberating the Afghan people. If it were, we should be in many other countries as well. Nor is it about being a compliant partner of our allies, particularly the USA. This is as much our problem and our war as it is that of our allies. Securing the safety of the Australian people is no longer simply a matter of securing our own borders. This war was about attacking a terrorist organisation which presented a threat to all of the Western world, including Australia. That makes it a just cause. It is about Australia sharing responsibility on a matter of mutual international interest with our

allies, and that makes it a just cause. I do not want to see any more ADF lives lost, nor do I want to see any more civilian lives lost because of the acts of terrorists.

I will finish with this remark. Last Thursday I attended the Remembrance Day service in my electorate. I was approached by the mother of an ADF member who is serving in Afghanistan. The mother was in tears when she asked me to strongly argue the case that Australia should withdraw from Afghanistan. She was in tears because every time her phone rings or there is a knock on the door, she is concerned that it is the phone call or the knock that tells her about her son. I understand exactly what she was saying to me. I may not understand how she feels, but I understand the point she was making to me. And I do understand that there would be so many other mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters in exactly the same situation. That is why I would like to see an end to this war sooner rather than later.