



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

COMMITTEES

**Foreign Affairs, Defence
and Trade Joint Committee**

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 10 May 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 10 May 2012
Page 4654
Questioner
Speaker Brodtmann, Gai, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (12:04): I welcome the opportunity to speak on this report today by the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, and commend the Member for Fadden for his speech. The member for Fadden, Senator Furner, the member for Tangney and I became quite close during our delegation to Afghanistan. Being the only female on the delegation I can tell you now that my colleagues were incredibly supportive of me. There were a number of professional challenges for me in going on this delegation. This was my first time going to a country that was experiencing conflict, but also there were a number of personal challenges for me, particularly in going to bases. I have been to bases before, but I have never actually stayed on one. We actually stayed on a range of bases in both Dubai and Al Minhad, outside of Dubai, and also in Afghanistan. That may not have posed its normal challenges: I actually got very good accommodation—better accommodation than most of the ADF get. What I found particularly confronting was actually the unisex toilets at Tarin Kowt. That is a legacy of the Dutch. There was an American commander there at the time and his inclination when he first took over the command was to change over the unisex nature of the amenities to dual sex. He thought that most people on the base would prefer that option, but they said they were happy with the Dutch arrangements, so the unisex arrangement was what was on offer. It is quite interesting running across pebbles in a pretty stark environment with a little towel and trying to get showered in this very tight amenity with both men and women there. It was a bit of a personal challenge in that respect, as was knowing that the special forces are outside the door guarding you. So there were a number of personal challenges for me.

As the member for Fadden acknowledged, I also shot for the first time in my life. I did find that quite confronting. The security and safety of the situation was very well managed. The member for Fadden, Senator Furner and the member for Tangney were incredibly supportive of me too knowing that it was my first time but also knowing that I found it quite confronting and really did not want to continue. What I also found confronting was lying down to do the shooting with all these hot bullets and the hot UAE sun skirting all over my body. I did not find that particularly interesting.

The most challenging thing for me was going down to Mirabad Valley, which is a war zone. It had been secured at that stage, but it was still incredibly fractious. I was not sure whether I wanted to go down there, and I did so with the support of the member for Fadden, as well as Senator Furner and the member for Tangney. They encouraged me to go down and experience it, and I am really glad that I did it. I think that in this life we have to stare down some of our demons and our fears. We have to take some risks to realise opportunities and gain more knowledge and experience. This was definitely one of those days. It was, as I said, very confronting to be there. We had to helicopter out. We were being guarded the whole time by the special forces. It was a bit like a Vietnam experience with them hanging out the helicopter while we were flying down to the valley.

It was an incredibly enriching and rewarding experience. Again, my advice to everyone is to take some risks in your life because you will enhance your life experience. We met with the elders of the community, and there were some younger men there too. We met with the senior citizens in this community—all men, of course. There was only the one other woman, a woman from AusAID. It was just absolutely fascinating to hear first-hand what their experiences have been in terms of us securing that environment in that valley and learning from them about how important it is to have a secure environment, particularly for their agriculture, their business and their farming, and how appreciative they were of the ADF being there and securing the valley for them.

What I also found particularly heartening was that there was this young ADF officer there, probably in his late 20s—I think he actually understood some Farsi; that is the language they speak—who had obviously established this incredibly trusting, warm and deep relationship with the senior citizens in the community. You could see that they held him in awe—he was a bit like a rock star. They hung off every word, particularly the young men. They greatly admired him. I cannot imagine the time he had spent with the people in that valley building up that level of trust, commitment and depth of understanding. In a way, he was incredibly revered. So I think that his departure from that area when he came back from his rotation would have been a real loss and they would have felt it quite deeply. Being a member of this delegation is, I think, probably one of the highlights of my life. I

was very glad that I was asked to partake in it. It was in mid-May last year, and we were a bit concerned that we were going there when things were beginning to hot up again, literally and strategically. During my time there I learnt a huge amount. The purpose of the visit was to go to the ADF units and visit the embedded personnel based in the vicinity and the Australian Embassy in Kabul and also conduct a roundtable discussion with the Afghan politicians at their parliament house. These visits were intended to provide us with an opportunity for further understanding of the issues affecting the ADF operations, the progress of our operations in Afghanistan and the governance in Afghanistan. I do believe strongly that we achieved those aims.

Afghanistan has been a topic of much discussion over the past decade and recent events ensure that its position on the national agenda continues to be prominent. In fact, the Minister for Defence today gave an update on Afghanistan, focusing mainly on the detainees, and the member for Fadden also gave a worthwhile response. I would like to pause here to express my sadness at hearing of the recent killing—I think it was in March—of those innocent civilians in southern Afghanistan. It was a truly abhorrent crime and there is no doubt that it makes the challenges for our ADF—and there are plenty of challenges—even more acute.

What our trip to Afghanistan really brought home to me was just how dedicated our Australian troops are. They are extraordinary men and women. They are working towards a common goal, despite the setbacks, the chaos and the carnage. I can say with confidence that this trip gave me a much greater understanding of their role and what we are doing to fight terrorism and to stabilise and secure Afghanistan. I share with the member for Fadden a degree of optimism because we have made progress in Afghanistan in the last 10 years, particularly at the human level.

Now when people ask me why we are in Afghanistan, I no longer only talk about our commitment to the alliance and the need to eliminate terrorists to defend our presence—although I acknowledge that is one of the main reasons—but I also talk about the training centres, the roads, the airfields, the mosques and the girls schools that I heard about that we have built. Six million children now go to school and one-third of them are girls. In 2001 this was around the one million mark and there were no girls at school.

Afghanistan's future stability and security relies as much on its infrastructure and getting the basics in place as it does on strongarming the enemy. Stability and security will not only come from eliminating the presence of terrorism; it will also come from training the military and the local police so that they can defend and protect their own people and their own country—and we are doing great work in that area. It will come from improving roads so that food can get to market and the economy can prosper. It will come from introducing a largely agricultural community to new crops to help get them off the addiction to opiate crops. It will come from training people so that they have the skills to build up their own nation.

Our overall approach—and this was really underscored during the delegation's visit there—needs to be tailored to the vastly different communities that make up Afghanistan. Having lived in India and having worked on the Middle East desk in Foreign Affairs, I have a strong appreciation of the differences between metropolitan and regional and rural communities right throughout that part of the world. But the differences in Afghanistan are incredibly stark. They are deeply tribal and embedded in centuries of history. This is why the challenges need to be tackled province by province and, in some cases, village by village—and they are.

I now want to focus on some of the highlights of the visit. I mentioned the personal challenges that I had to face when I was there. Having not been a scout or a majorly outdoor girl, I have to say that it was challenging doing the unisex toilet. Apart from those personal challenges, we also had the great opportunity to meet with some of the parliamentarians in the Afghan parliament and in Kabul we met with the internationally renowned Fawzia Kofi, who is a bit of a megastar throughout the world, particularly in the States and Canada. She, at that stage, was chairwoman of the Defence and Territorial Affairs Standing Committee. She has a masters in business and management and she is a strong advocate of human rights, particularly of women's and children's rights. She is also from a very politically active family. In our meeting she was incredibly articulate and forthright and she praised our presence in Afghanistan and wanted it to last as long as possible because for her it ensured that women like her were safe. In Uruzghan we met only with men.

I mentioned before about the experience at Mirabad Valley, which was another real highlight, and also army and police in Tarin Kowt. All of them, particularly the very influential Governor Shirzad, praised the international community's work in building the vital infrastructure particularly in waste management and food storage facilities and all those basics that we so take for granted here—and particularly for the women's and children's health

centres. Governor Shirzad was also at pains to point out the gains we had made in stability and security in the last 12 months. We are going back to May 2011 now, particularly in the last six months. In recent years the international community, as the member for Fadden has mentioned, has trained tens of thousands of members of the national army, and many of them have been trained by young Australians in the artillery training centre in Kabul. They have built up the Afghan forces; they have essentially doubled them. Meeting these young Australians was incredibly inspirational. They are just young kids, they are only in their 20s. That is what was so extraordinary about meeting so many of these ADF actually on operations, that these are just kids in their 20s dealing with enormous challenges, facing up to enormous challenges and succeeding against those challenges. These guys were just young and cheeky—there were a few women there but mainly men—and yet their youth and their cheekiness in a way belied a maturity and a confidence and a commitment to training the national army. They were extraordinary young people and, again, just a real inspiration. We should be very proud of the ADF.

Our mission in Afghanistan is multifaceted and it is working. Uruzghan now has double the number of patrol bases as a result of the training efforts we have done with the police. We have also got hundreds more tradesmen thanks to our trade training centre. There are many examples at the human level that really affected me. But there was one particular instance that actually brought me to tears and I think it brought the rest of the delegation to tears. We went to an ANA English reading class. Apparently the maximum age for people enrolling in the ANA is 35 years but this particular gentleman that came up to the board to show us his skill was probably about 55 years. He was bearded, gray, painfully thin and deeply lined from the extreme weather experienced in Afghanistan. He had been doing this course for I think it was about six weeks, and he got up and read loudly and clearly and proudly. Six weeks before he could not read. I know we are there for the stability, I know we are there for the security, I know that we are there to fight terrorism, but that to me just underscored that we are also making a huge impact at the human level, and I think that just was a symbol of our achievements in Afghanistan since we have been there.

The member for Fadden also mentioned Kandahar hospital, an extraordinary hospital, incredibly modern and with amazingly dedicated doctors and nurses working there from all over the world. It was doctors and nurses gaining valuable battlefield experience. Again, the value of that battlefield experience was underscored when Gabrielle Giffords, the US politician who was shot in Tucson—unfortunately she has had to retire from politics—was fortunate enough to be wheeled into a hospital where there was a qualified surgeon, Dr Peter Rhee, who had been a military surgeon for 24 years and had treated hundreds and hundreds of battlefield injuries during stints in Afghanistan and Iraq. Without that experience I doubt that that woman's life would have been saved. The personnel there were at pains to say to us that we needed to get that expertise here in Australia.

Debate adjourned.