



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

STATEMENTS

Iraq

SPEECH

Wednesday, 3 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Speaker Snowdon, Warren, MP	Question No.

Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (11:28): Firstly, I acknowledge the contributions of all those who have participated in this discussion so far and those who will follow. I want to make the point at the outset that, clearly, the circumstances of our actions in Iraq today are very different from those of 2003. Indeed, it could be argued—I think cogently—that we are where we are now because of the legacy and folly of the misadventure of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. As an active participant in the debate at the time I recall when, on Tuesday 18 March 2003, the then Leader of the Opposition, Simon Crean, said:

The Prime Minister today, in a reckless and unnecessary act, has committed Australia to war.

I remember the arguments we had about whether or not there were links between Iraq and the events of September 11. It would appear there were no links. There were no links between Iraq and the Bali bombings, no evidence that Iraq was a real and present threat to our security and no evidence of weapons of mass destruction. There was no international support and no support from the Iraqi government. Yet we, in an act of historical folly, committed ourselves to war and the rest, as they say, sadly, is history, with Iraq now tortured by the sectarianism and now the barbarism of ISIS.

Today, we do have a legitimate reason to be involved: to intervene in a humanitarian crisis where tens of thousands of lives are at risk. We know that among those perpetrating these massive unseemly murderous barbaric assaults on human decency are indeed some Australian citizens. We are now in the position, at the request of the United States through President Obama and with the support of the Iraqi government, to be committing ourselves as the Prime Minister has done to further actions in Iraq. We do so in the full knowledge, unlike in 2003, that the world community believes that we should be taking action. Just as it was agreed that we should have taken action, and did, in the first Gulf War. The UN Secretary-General has called for the world community to take decisive action and pointed out clearly that international terrorism has global concerns, and that we need a unified international approach to the defeating of terrorism.

I was attracted recently by an article written by Gareth Evans in *The Australian* on Tuesday in which, in referring to whether or not our actions in the decisions that have been made were legitimate or not, he made these observations:

These generally accepted criteria of legitimacy are that the atrocities occurring or feared are sufficiently serious to justify, *prima facie*, a military response; that the response has a primarily humanitarian motive; that no lesser response is likely to be effective in halting or averting the harm; that the proposed response is proportional to the threat; and that the intervention will actually be effective, doing more good than harm.

Later in the same article, he said:

So as things now stand, the only justification—moral, political or military—for renewed external military intervention in Iraq is to meet the international responsibility to protect victims, or potential victims, of mass atrocity.

I believe that these are troubling times and we know they are troubling times. We are concerned and we should be concerned about events in the Middle East and particularly with what the ISIS has been doing. I believe that it is appropriate that we are involved in the manner in which the Prime Minister has determined. I think it is important that we accept the right of the Prime Minister and the executive of government to make this determination and that it should not be a determination which is made through the parliament. I do believe that parliament should have the right, and has the responsibility, to debate the issues but that it is inappropriate, and I think it belies our own history, for us to be put in a position where the security of this nation could be threatened by a folly inside this parliament. I will not go into explaining what that means. I am sure all of us know what I am referring to given the structure of our parliament today.

I have said it before: I opposed and voted against the resolution by Prime Minister Howard to commit Australians to Iraq in 2003. That was a wrong decision; it was a bad decision. It was a decision that undermined our national interests. Nevertheless, it was taken and we now wear the folly of that decision. But at the same time, we need to recognise and acknowledge that when those fighting men and women of the Australian Defence Force go into action, in this case in a limited way through the use of air assets, they are doing so on our behalf. They are doing so to protect our national interests and are doing so at the direction of the Australian government. We owe them our 100 per cent support. I know that members of this parliament will give them that support.

We need, I think, to acknowledge that we have a role in this place. Our role in this place is to make sure that the government is held accountable, but also to make sure that decisions which are necessarily taken because of our national security interests are allowed to be taken in an appropriate way. I note that in this particular case the Prime Minister, through his officers, has been consulting with the Leader of the Opposition. I think that is as it should be.

But I also believe that we in this country have a responsibility to understand what is happening here at home; to be more involved in understanding what leads people to take the silly decision—the disastrous decision; the murderous decision—to go across and participate in this atrocious genocide in Iraq. We need, as others have said, to target those terrorists. We should not be targeting religions; we need to understand the importance of acceptance of our diversity, to understand the importance of maintaining that diversity and not allowing ourselves to be cowed by the actions of ruthless and murderous thugs. It seems to me that we in this place have a primary responsibility to show strong leadership in this regard.

I am very pleased with the very positive role which is being played by the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow minister for foreign affairs in supporting the decisions taken by the government. I do not think, by the way, that we add anything to the discussion by the foreign minister attacking members of this parliament for having a different view from her on whether or not the parliament should be allowed to debate the issues around this matter. I do not believe that is appropriate and I do not believe it helps. I think what we should be doing is talking about our responsibilities in this parliament to support our people on the ground, to understand our national interests and to make sure that we provide appropriate support where it is required.

As I said earlier, I do believe that we do have a responsibility in this place to debate these issues. I think it is important that the government introduce a motion at some point. It would be a wise thing to do, to test the mood of the parliament—certainly the House of Representatives—and I encourage them to do so. It will not lose anything. We are committed to supporting the government. I know that members of the opposition will take that responsibility very seriously. But a debate does not hurt. I would encourage people to participate in this discussion as a way of testing the water and, indeed, showing their support for the decisions which have been taken by the government and supporting our troops as they embark on very dangerous and potentially tragic missions in the Middle East.