



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Iraq and Syria

SPEECH

Monday, 23 November 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

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Mr THISTLETHWAITE (Kingsford Smith) (11:38): Yesterday I met with representatives of the Assyrian community in my local area and heard their tales of despair over what is occurring in their homeland of Iraq and the persecution that many of their relatives and friends have faced over the last couple of years. Many have had to flee their traditional homelands in places like Turkey and Iraq with nothing more than their passports and the clothes on their backs. Many of their family members have been killed by Daesh in this immoral insurgency that is occurring in that important part of the world.

The conflicts occurring in Syria and Iraq represent one of the worst humanitarian disasters of our time. More than 11 million people have been displaced due to these conflicts, with most fleeing to neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that more than 25 per cent of those people who are fleeing these conflicts are children. There are currently more than 3,700 children in Jordan and Lebanon living without one parent, both of their parents or any adult caregivers. The United Nations Security Council has called on all states to join the fight against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and redouble efforts to prevent further attacks by the militant group.

For over a year, Labor have offered bipartisan support for the actions that this government has taken in committing Australian troops to fighting Daesh in both Iraq and Syria. But, at the same time, we have called for greater scrutiny by and greater involvement of this parliament as the representative of the Australian people—the people who have the right to know about the long-term strategy of the Australian government in restoring peace and stability in Iraq and Syria. We believe that the Australian people have a right to know and that this parliament as a representative of the people should have a debate about Australia's involvement and the long-term strategy in both Iraq and Syria.

This is nothing foreign to this parliament. In 1991, the parliament debated for two full days Australia's involvement in the first Iraq war. In 2003, there was a significant debate in this parliament again in respect of Australia's involvement in the second Iraq war. But that has not been the case this time.

We all want to defeat the evil Daesh and stop what is occurring in Syria and Iraq. That is why Labor have offered bipartisan support to this government's involvement in and its commitment of Australian troops to that region—but our support is not a blank cheque. Where the lives of Australian soldiers are at risk, the Australian people deserve and have the right to know what the government's strategy is to bring about and maintain long-term democracy and peace in this region, and that strategy is not evident at the moment, unfortunately. We do not know what the Australian government's strategy in Iraq is if Daesh is defeated. How do we bring about long-lasting peace and an end to the sectarian violence that has plagued that country for decades? In Syria, if we do defeat Daesh, what is the Australian government's approach with respect to the Assad government?

It is a complicated geopolitical situation that is developing in that area. In recent months, we have seen Russia engage in air strikes on the premise that they were fighting Daesh, but it appears that those air strikes were targeted more at anti-Assad forces and shoring up the Assad regime. The US in the past have said that Assad must be removed as part of a long-term solution in this area. Indeed, the Liberal government has stated in the past that the Assad regime is illegitimate, pointing to the killing of hundreds of thousands of its own citizens; yet the foreign minister has in recent months said that the Assad regime may be part of a longer-term solution.

The Australian people have the right to know what our government's strategy is. Labor have offered bipartisan support and we do want to defeat Daesh—particularly in the wake of the shocking events in Paris and Mali—but we want to know how that will occur. Where there are Australian soldiers' lives at risk, this parliament should debate fully the strategy in Syria and Iraq.