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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

**Regional Assistance Mission
to the Solomon Islands**

SPEECH

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (18:17): I commend the member for Forde for his tribute to the Solomon Islands, and I do envy his opportunity to have gone to watch those elections. It's something I have always wanted to do, having worked in Foreign Affairs when the Cambodian elections were taking place and having heard stories about other DFAT colleagues who had been observers at elections throughout the world. It really does remind us what precious, precious gifts democracy and the right to vote in a free and safe environment are. I envy you and commend you for the speech you've just made, because I would have loved to have been part of that delegation.

The reason I rise tonight is that I want to pay tribute to the public servants, police, military and all the Australian personnel, many of them from Canberra, who made such a significant contribution to the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands. It was known then as, Operation Anode or—I love this—Operation Helpem Fren. It was an extraordinary contribution that we made over a very long time, and the contribution changed depending on the nature of what was actually happening on the island at the time. I do know many public servants who I worked with in foreign affairs, in Defence and in AusAID made a significant contribution, which is why I was keen to talk on this motion tonight. What Australia did with RAMSI was a bit of an experiment. It was trialling a new kind of security architecture. There was the role of the military, but the police also had a very significant role in this process, as did many public servants from Finance, Treasury, AusAID and Foreign Affairs—a range of government departments. There was also a large Army Reserve force as part of the contribution, which again was quite unique. The Reserves play a significant role in securing our nation in a range of engagements here in Australia as well as overseas. In the Solomon Islands, they really did play a significant role. As I said, we also had AusAID playing its part, as did DFAT and others across the public service.

What was also interesting about this is that it was an experiment for Australia in looking at exploring a new kind of security architecture where we had a number of different agencies involved in shaping that architecture and playing a role in securing and improving the governance, justice, education and social systems and political environments in the Solomon Islands. But it was also an unusual experiment for the Pacific because, as we've heard from the member for Burt, there was a great deal of cooperation between Pacific nations in this effort, in Helpem Fren.

We had countries from all over the Pacific. Australia and New Zealand, of course, but we also had Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Marshall Islands, Palau, Micronesia, Niue, Tonga, Samoa, the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Nauru, Kiribati and Tuvalu involved. So there was a significant effort from the Pacific community in ensuring that one of their fellow Pacific nations was secure and had the social, economic and political infrastructure in place to succeed in the future—and legal infrastructure as well, because that was vitally important in terms of where the Solomon Islands was at the time.

It was an experiment in the way that Australia approached the mission, Operation Anode, Helpem Fren, in the Solomon Islands, and it was also an experiment because we had this significant contribution and cooperation right across the Pacific, which I don't think we've seen repeated. I'm not aware of a deployment or a mission where we have actually seen that range of countries from the Pacific all taking part in the one mission to achieve these extraordinary results for the Solomon Islands. But it wasn't without its challenges. I'm sure you've heard from others that, when the social and the economic infrastructure was getting put in place, things got a bit tense for a while on the political front. But, as we've heard, the outcomes were positive in terms of the prosperity, the economic growth, the justice systems that are in place now, the education systems, the economic systems and the governance systems—which are so vitally important. For any society to succeed, you need those governance and justice systems in place. Without that fundamental framework, you have a very, very fragile foundation of a nation, economy and society.

So in the Solomon Islands we had this experiment for Australia in terms of the way that government agencies could work together and work with the ADF and the police—and the police played a significant role—and also in terms of the way that the Pacific nations cooperated and worked together. What we did in the Solomon Islands

highlighted the fact that we need to look at the security architecture in the Pacific. We trialled a particular security architecture in the Pacific and we trialled a security reform, which started Australia having a conversation again about what a security architecture should look like in the Pacific and what sort of civil security architecture and military security architecture we needed to have in place.

It started Australia thinking about security in the Pacific and what we and the rest of the Pacific needed to do to create a secure, stable, thriving and prosperous environment in our immediate region. Questions were asked. What would security reform look like? What involvement would the Defence Force need to have? What involvement would the Police Force need to have? Do we need a national security versus a public security presence?

It really did help us to refocus on the Pacific. We still need to do a great deal more work in the Pacific in terms of engaging on the Pacific. In particular, we need to play a greater role in the Pacific on cybersecurity, but also on building capacity and capability.

One of the reasons that the whole Solomon Islands model was so successful in so many ways—as I said, it did have a few glitches, but the results have generally been positive—was that there was the civil-military process. There was cooperation with the civil and military working together. I want to commend my colleague the member for Eden-Monaro for establishing the Australian Civil-Military Centre at Queanbeyan when we were last in government. That centre provides an invaluable resource for looking at how we can have those military and civilian solutions for the Pacific, the Asia-Pacific, the Indo Pacific and our world. I'm particularly impressed with the work that they do for women, peace and security, and also in ensuring that women have a role in a post-conflict environment, in a transitioning environment. Having a seat at the table when we are negotiating is vitally important. I was a very strong advocate of that in Afghanistan.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to a number of former friends and bosses, and people I used to work with in DFAT. I pay tribute to Nick Warner, who assumed the role of special coordinator as leader of RAMSI. Also, I pay tribute to James Batley, who took over as special coordinator, and Tim George. There were New Zealanders who played a very active role. Paul Ash became a special coordinator. We also had the Fijian assistant special coordinator, Sekove Naqiolevu, as well as Peter Nobel.

In addition, because of that significant police presence, we had Ben McDevitt from the Australian Federal Police playing a really important role, working with Nick Warner, the New Zealanders, the Solomon Islanders, the Pacific community, the Australian Defence Force and the other public servants and civilian agencies from Australia and from around the Pacific, and working to ensure that the aims and objectives of achieving the request that we got from the Governor-General of Solomon Islands was actually achieved. What this mission showed was that agencies can cooperate and that, most importantly, we in the Pacific can cooperate to achieve a great outcome.

Debate adjourned.