



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Iraq and Syria

SPEECH

Thursday, 25 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 25 September 2014
Page 10687
Questioner
Speaker Snowdon, Warren, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (11:24): It gives me no pleasure really to speak in this debate because it is a debate we would want otherwise not to have. Nevertheless, it is the case that we now have committed Australian forces yet again into the Middle East. We as a parliament need to indicate our strong support for them and the reasons for which they are embarking. I am pleased to support the contribution made by the Leader of the Opposition in his speech on 22 September. He made a number of very important points, including that our support for this is not about jingoism or nationalism; it is a calculation of conscience and national interests. He outlined four key points which underpin our approach, which are that we do not support the deployment of ground combat units to directly engage in fighting ISIL, that Australian operations should be confined to the territory of Iraq, that our involvement should continue only until the Iraqi government are in a position to take full responsibility for the security of their people and their nation and that, if the Iraqi government and their forces engage in unacceptable conduct or adopt unacceptable policies, we should withdraw our support immediately. Nevertheless, we do know that we are confronting an insidious form of terror in the Middle East right at this time. We need to comprehend its impact on us not only tangentially, in a sense, but also directly as a result of the impacts it is having on the Middle East itself.

I had the good fortune to meet with some representatives of the Turkish parliament, including its Speaker, earlier in the week. It is clear now that tens of thousands—I think in excess of 120,000—refugees came across the Turkish border in a matter of 24 or 48 hours. That puts in stark light the impact that this terrorist activity is having on the region. We should not understate what it means in terms of a humanitarian disaster and its regional implications. We are a long way from the place, but we do understand that this is in part a legacy, I think, of our failed behaviour in 2003. Nevertheless, we are now in a position, despite what has happened previously, where we are committed to addressing the issues in Iraq and, indeed, having an impact on the region to try and prevent and stop the insidious work of this murderous and barbaric organisation, ISIL. We know that its impact is broad across the community, almost non-discriminatory in its negative impact, and particularly on women and girls, who are being oppressed, raped, tortured and forced into sexual servitude. We need to understand what this means. I think that having Australian troops, in this case Air Force units, deployed is really a very important sign to the world that we take this matter very, very seriously.

We know that the Australian personnel will be based out of Al Minhad, in the UAE. It is a very comfortable base. They will be looked after properly, but their role is really very important, and they will be embarking on some very dangerous activity. We want to ensure that they have our support—I know that they do across this parliament—and that their families have our support and love for them as they think about their partners, uncles, fathers, cousins, mates, whatever their relationship might be, who are over there at the moment and will be into the future, who knows for how long. This is an issue which ought to be front and centre of the minds of all of us, as I have spoken about on many occasions in this place.

But we also need to understand the impact here at home. I do not think that ill-informed and inflammatory comments about Islam are helpful. I am very concerned indeed and regret the fact that there are some in our community, including—as the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow minister for citizenship and multiculturalism said in a letter which they have sent out to the community only in the last day or so—a very few elected representatives in this parliament, who have made comments which have the potential to damage community harmony and inflame tensions. We strongly oppose those ill-informed and dangerous views, and we will continue to speak out against them.

We are in this together. We need to make sure that there is a consensus across the Australian community. Now is not the time for division. That means that we should not be picking on one section of the Australian community just because of their religion. We need to understand that we live in what is probably the best example of a multicultural community in the world, and to have any person or persons seek to break down our belief in multiculturalism—our support for multiculturalism—in the way that is being done by some in this place is very dangerous.

We have seen the acts of idiots—and sadly one of those was killed this week—but we need to understand that this is a minority group who do not represent the broader population. They represent something which is foreign to us—alien to us—and something that we across this country will never support. At the same time, we realise there is a direct relationship between what they may be doing or attempting to do here and what is happening in the Middle East, and that is why our engagement there is so vitally important.

This particular insidious movement transgresses—goes across—geographical boundaries. It is not nation upon nation. It is a group of terrorist thugs trying to intimidate people in the community by murderous and barbaric acts. We need to reject those murderous and barbaric acts, and we should be uniting behind those in the community who are suffering as a direct result. Some are suffering through an indirect affiliation, because of their religion. They should not suffer. We should be making every effort to ensure that we work across this community to support those wonderful people. As the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow minister have said in their letter:

The Islamic story in Australia has a rich history and grows stronger each year. Australia's Muslim community continues to do our nation a great service by fostering enduring cultural and religious harmony, and making a substantial contribution to our national prosperity.

Well may that continue into the future, as I am sure it will. This reflects a modern Australian multiculturalism; a story of cultural enrichment, social cohesion and economic growth, and it is a story that the Labor Party is committed to and will always defend.

This is a very important time for all of us and we need to understand its implications on us not only directly but also indirectly. We need to comprehend that the way in which these matters are being played out in other places is a source of great concern and should be a source of great concern to all civilised peoples. That is why our engagement is so important.

I commend the statements made by the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister—although I did not agree with everything the Prime Minister had to say nevertheless I agree with the sentiments. We in this place need to unite behind the fact that we have sent Australian Defence Force personnel into potentially mortal danger. We need to comprehend and to understand what it means for them and their families, and subsequently what it means for us. We are playing an important role on the international stage albeit as a small-power nation, really, but at the same time we are showing our commitment to those values about which I spoke earlier.