House of Representatives

Statements on Indulgence

Afghanistan

Speech

Tuesday, 12 November 2013

By authority of the House of Representatives
Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Prime Minister) (18:06): About a fortnight ago the Leader of the Opposition and I travelled to Uruzgan province in Afghanistan to mark the imminent withdrawal of Australian military forces from that province. As I said in Afghanistan, Australia's longest war is ending not with victory, not with defeat, but with hope that Afghanistan will be a better country for our presence. We note the high price that has been paid by our military forces: 40 deaths; 161 very seriously wounded; and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the 25,000 who served there carrying the unseen scars of war for the rest of their lives.

We have paid a high price for limited progress in Uruzgan province. Nevertheless, there has been progress, and perhaps the greatest progress has been the advancement of the life of the women of the province as a result of our presence. I can report to the House that there are now some 26 girls schools in Uruzgan province, which is a 20-fold increase since 2001. Up to 80 per cent of expectant mothers receive at least some prenatal care. This is an extraordinary change in what until very recently was almost a feudal society. It is the men and women of the Australian armed forces and the men and women of the Australian aid effort, uniformed and civilian, who have been largely responsible for this, working with our Afghan allies.

While the Leader of the Opposition and I were in Uruzgan, we were presented by the Governor of Uruzgan with some artefacts that he invited us to present to the Australian parliament as a token of gratitude for the work of the Australian teams, both military and civilian, in the province.

There is still a vast distance to be covered before that province, or indeed most places in Afghanistan, could even begin to resemble a pluralist democracy. But nevertheless progress has been made. Still there are some five male students for every female school student in that province. But Malalai High School, one of the high schools that has opened and flourished with Australian support, is about to graduate a class of girl students. The governor of the province presented the artefacts I am holding to the Leader of the Opposition and me in the hope that they would be laid before the Australian parliament as a token of the gratitude of the people of Uruzgan to the people of Australia, and of the respect of the people of Uruzgan to the people of Australia for the sacrifices that have been made by our country on their behalf.

With your indulgence, Madam Speaker, I will present these artefacts to the Clerk.