HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STATEMENTS ON INDULGENCE

Afghanistan

SPEECH

Tuesday, 12 November 2013

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr SHORTEN (Maribyrnong—Leader of the Opposition) (18:10): On the first day of the 44th Parliament, it is a good day to say well done to the men and women of the Australian Defence Force and our supporting civilian agencies. Our long commitment has been characterised by two intense phases: the initial international intervention in 2001-02, and the significant re-engagement from 2005 to 2013. Along with 49 other countries, we have been part of a United Nations mandated mission to deny resources and opportunity to international terrorism that possessing the state of Afghanistan had formerly offered. We have also helped bring to an end one of the most brutal regimes we have seen.

We are proud in this parliament that we have maintained bipartisan support for our troops and our civilian agencies in Afghanistan. I am proud that the Rudd and Gillard governments found a new way forward to give the best chance of success to our aims, by reorienting the strategy that was being pursued, which included a focus on building Afghanistan’s capacity to assume responsibility for their own security and laying the foundation for better governance and a better future for Afghans.

Our understanding is that such conflicts are resolved by addressing the range of security, economic, social and political factors at issue, as evidenced by our creation of the Australian Civil-Military Centre, the development of better approaches to our provincial reconstruction effort, and by ensuring that this has become a central focus for our military support.

We leave behind in Uruzgan a legacy that includes schools and roads, skills and social and health infrastructure. We welcome the progress in transition to Afghanistan-led security right across Afghanistan, of which the handover ceremony attended by the Prime Minister and me on 29 October in Tarin Kowt is but one signpost.

I am grateful to the Prime Minister for the recent invitation to visit our troops. I believe I am the first opposition leader to accept the invitation. It was a profound and informative experience, most clearly, I would have to say, about the professionalism and dedication of our armed forces. They have taken the vow of absence, risk, distance from home and the daily uncertainty of what each hour of their tour will bring. Any persons in this House—and I know there are many—who have visited Afghanistan immediately perceive how close the risk is and how unpredictable events can be at any tick of the clock and from almost any direction, be it at midnight or in the morning. It is in a land and a nation that we can never fully understand or predict.

I believe there are no words to thank our troops and our civilian agencies for their sacrifice of the ordinariness of life that we take for granted. We take for granted being able to come home to our children or go out in safety and regularity and good cheer to a football field or a day at the beach. Our domestic, unheroic, ordinary lives far from hostilities and furies are protected by the risks of our servicemen and servicewomen. We thank our troops, but, of course, words are not enough. Our military forces have almost gone beyond the reach of our gratitude. The opposition salutes our troops and our civilian agencies. We wish them good fortune in the days and months of our mission still pending before they make it home. It will be a glad homecoming from a tremendous job after many years.

Along with the two artefacts the Prime Minister presented, I would like to present a list of the young women who have been able to complete education at high school in Uruzgan.