



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Iraq and Syria

SPEECH

Monday, 22 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 22 September 2014
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Questioner
Speaker Thistlethwaite, Matt, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr THISTLETHWAITE (Kingsford Smith) (11:22): When I think of Australian values, words that come to mind include 'democracy', 'peace', 'secularism' and 'the rule of law'. They are the values which define our system of government, our culture and, indeed, our approach to international relations and diplomacy. As a nation and as a people, Australia has never been involved in unilateral invasion and conflict. It is not in our nature and it does not fit well with our values. But we do play our part in upholding the values of democracy, peace and the rule of law and in protecting the sanctity of life. We are known throughout the world for our loyalty and for our staunch adherence to and willingness to stand up for those values that I mentioned earlier. Once again, Australia is entering a region of conflict. But as is always the case for our nation and its people, we do not put our own dedicated and skilled personnel in harm's way lightly. These are steps which we take with great seriousness and consideration.

It is well accepted that the 2003 Iraq war was a mistake which was costly for the people of Iraq and for participating countries including Australia. Overnight we saw the former Prime Minister John Howard admit that he was embarrassed by the actions that were taken in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Not only was the Prime Minister embarrassed, it was the nation of Australia and its people that were embarrassed by that unjustified action. But 2014 is not 2003. In 2003, the government of Iraq and the majority of the Iraqi population opposed the military action of the United States and the so-called coalition of the willing. The aim of the 2003 action was poorly defined and changed during the course of the invasion. At the beginning it was to eradicate weapons of mass destruction, then later on it became regime change. The 2003 war was based on false information about weapons of mass destruction, and the UN's weapons inspectors were not given enough time to do their work. The war was not supported by the United Nations, and the international community was overwhelmingly opposed to military action.

In contrast, today, the democratically elected national unity government of Iraq is seeking help from the international community to protect civilians from the real threat of mass atrocity crimes or genocide. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition and the shadow minister for foreign affairs, Tanya Plibersek, recently wrote in an opinion piece on Australia's approach to this mission in Iraq and adherence to the doctrine to protect in guiding our decision to support the action. The doctrine to protect, developed through the United Nations, through which the former Labor foreign affairs minister Gareth Evans had an influential hand, informs the decisions of governments and countries as to the right time to intervene in foreign disputes and humanitarian crises. It was born out of horrific acts of barbarism like the 1994 Rwandan genocide or the conflict in Kosovo and it sets out a set of criteria which should be met before taking the difficult decision to become involved in such actions. Those criteria include that there is a just cause, the intention is right, the action is a last resort, the action has legitimate authority, it is proportionate, and it has a reasonable prospect of success.

In regard to the situation in Iraq, Labor is of the belief that these criteria have been met in respect to Australia's commitment to this action. Over the last few months, the horrific and barbaric nature of the Islamic State has shocked the world. We have watched as innocent people of Iraq have been displaced and forced to flee their homes with nothing but their lives. Just this weekend, the news broke of more than 60,000 people, mainly Syrian Kurds, seeking refuge in Turkey as Islamic state militants continued to seize land and villages in Syria. Until recently, Turks and Kurds had fought a civil war that killed 40,000 people. Now Turkey accepts Kurds as refugees. This is evidence of ISIS's power and ability to change the geopolitical situation in the Middle East and the dynamics of the region. As caring, compassionate global citizens, Australians have been deeply saddened at the news and the images of peace-loving people in northern Iraqi and Syria clutching their loved ones as they flee what has become a ruthless, evil force seemingly ready to kill at will anyone that does not share their extreme radicalism and bloodlust.

But although the horrible scenes appear as a distant nightmare, we have been reminded of how quickly this nightmare could be visited upon the people of Australia. Last week we saw a joint task force uncover evidence of a plot to undertake terrorist activity here in Australia. Across Sydney and Brisbane, more than 800 police

carried out pre-dawn raids searching 25 homes in two states, detaining and questioning 15 men and charging two. For Australians, this news was a salient reminder of the horrible truth that we are not immune from the threat of terrorism here in Australia and there are evil people intent on destroying Australians' peaceful way of life. Thankfully, we have also seen the government rethink some of its budget cuts in programs that are aimed at creating harmony within our community.

I speak of the countering violent extremism program which was put in place by the previous Labor government and was proposed to be cut in this year's budget by the Abbott government. Thankfully, they have backed off on that commitment. They have also backed off on their commitment to get rid of the Independent National Security Legislation Monitor, which is performing a very important role in ensuring that our security and intelligence laws are up to date and armed with the necessary actions to combat the threat of terrorism. More recently, we have seen the Attorney-General back off on what were draconian Racial Discrimination Act changes. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the 800 individuals who were involved in uncovering this plot last week for their professionalism and dedication to the cause of protecting Australian citizens.

Labor is supportive of Australia's humanitarian mission to northern Iraq through the provision of military personnel and equipment. We are proud to be among upwards of 50 countries in a coalition committed to countering the spread of ISIL. But we are not blind supporters of this mission. Our support is conditional on the belief that we should be only committing our resources as long as it takes the Iraqi government to regain control of its own security to protect its people. We would also like to thank the government for its bipartisan approach and call on them to once again ensure that they are forthcoming with information on this very important mission over coming weeks in the parliament to keep the Australian people well apprised of its progress.

In respect of aid assistance to the region and the humanitarian effort, particularly the support for refugees who are in very difficult circumstances—and many are women and children—Labor of course supports the nature of this motion and the call for increasing aid to assist those refugees who are fleeing this persecution.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to wish our service men and women all the very best on their mission. I say to them: you have the full support of the Labor Party and the people of Australia in the important work that you will do in this region. There is no doubt that your bravery, knowledge and skills will help save countless lives. We are indebted to you for your service, and the thoughts and prayers of the people of our nation are with you.