Afghanistan

SPEECH

Monday, 21 November 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Leader of the Opposition) (12:36): I rise to support the fine words of the Prime Minister and I am grateful for the opportunity to join her in this expression of support for our military commitment to Afghanistan.

With the passing of the 10th anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks, and of the beginning of Australia's commitment to Afghanistan, it is fitting that we in this parliament reconsider and recommit to the military campaign. Much has been achieved over the past year. The United States and its key allies have badly damaged al-Qaeda. Information recovered from the Bin Laden compound suggests that, with half its key leadership killed or captured, the movement had even on its own assessment largely lost its capacity to inflict harm on Western targets and had failed in its quest to portray the West as being at war with Islam. In President Obama's assessment, al-Qaeda is now headed for defeat.

Inside Afghanistan, President Karzai has declared that Afghan forces should assume full responsibility to lead combat operations by the end of 2014, and members of the international coalition are planning for a transition to meet that deadline. President Obama has announced that 33,000 US troops will be withdrawn from Afghanistan through 2012. Prime Minister Cameron has already withdrawn 500 British troops, but both the United States and the United Kingdom continue to emphasise that the transition in Afghanistan will depend upon the actual security situation inside the country and that some coalition forces could remain for a long time.

The international coalition's commitment to Afghanistan cannot be entirely open-ended because that would excuse the Afghan people from taking responsibility for their own country. It would amount to a Western takeover. On the other hand, withdrawal dates cannot be irrevocable either or the Taliban win just by waiting out the West. The best exit strategy is to win. For Australia, this means playing our part in defeating the Taliban in Oruzgan province and completing the task of training the 4th Brigade so that central government can contain and defeat the insurgency.

Our soldiers should not be in Afghanistan a moment longer than is necessary but, while there is vital work that they can do, that mission should be sustained. While it may well be possible to have significant troop withdrawals by 2014, it would be wrong to think that Australia's or the broader international community's involvement with Afghanistan should terminate at that point. It would be unrealistic for Australia to stay longer than our principal allies are staying but it is vital that we achieve our mission: Afghanistan should not be abandoned after 2014.

Australia must remain a reliable friend and partner of Afghanistan, if necessary, for many years to come. That may well require contributing to Afghan security beyond 2014, including with troops in an overwatch role— and I note the Prime Minister's comments a few moments ago about the possible continuation of special forces in that country.

We know that victory in Afghanistan will not resemble the unequivocal resolution of World War II; it will be more like success in Northern Ireland, involving a process as much as an outcome. Our goal is the establishment of a stable, effective and humane government, at least by Afghan standards, backed by reliable security forces.

I would like to confront head-on the claim that this is an unwinnable war. The impact of the surge of US troops which began in 2009 has been dramatic. At times, this has been overshadowed by high-profile suicide bombings and the tragedy of Australian casualties. Still, grief and disappointment should not override judgment. The coalition and its Afghan partners have made important security gains across much of the country, even though the border with Pakistan remains porous and key elements of the insurgency can enjoy a form of R&R there.

Progress is fragile. There is no certainty that recent security gains will be turned into a durable, stable country. Still, my most recent visit reinforced my confidence that Australia is making a difference, at least in Oruzgan province. The security situation there continues to improve. Taliban numbers are decreasing. They are finding it increasingly difficult to move around, and there are more relatively safe areas than during my previous visit.
The insurgency still has the capacity to inflict casualties using roadside bombs to carry out civilian massacres and assassinate officials of the Karzai government.

The Australian military assessment though is that the Taliban’s ability to engage in direct combat with coalition forces or even with the Afghan army has been seriously degraded. The transition from largely Western to largely Afghan security forces will take time. But, thanks to the work of the Australian mentoring task force, the 4th Brigade is now among the best in the Afghan army and is disproving the view of some strategic analysts that the only people in Afghanistan who shy away from fighting are the Afghan National Army.

In Oruzgan, more schools and clinics are open and many girls are getting an education for the first time. The road between Tarin Kowt and Chora has been sealed and a four-hour journey can now be done in 20 minutes. I understand that there are now individual cars on the road as travellers no longer feel the need to be in convoy for safety. Local villagers, in a pattern which echoes Iraqi uprising against the insurgents in that country, are reported to be increasingly turning on the Taliban.

But, for Australian soldiers on the ground, the insurgency does remain potentially deadly. There is no such thing as casualty-free combat. Soldiers understand that, and we should too. Because of the higher intensity of our operations, we have lost 21 soldiers over the past two years compared to 11 in the previous eight years of our involvement. Nor should we overlook incidents in which rogue Afghan soldiers have turned on their Australian mentors. The element of betrayal makes these deaths particularly tragic. In any traumatised and armed society, though, there will be individuals who act violently even against friends. Our enemies hope to foster this type of treachery because it is the surest way to shake our own people’s faith in the mission, so it is important not to play into their hands. Trust between comrades is vital for success in battle and must now be fully restored. I am pleased to say that the Australians I met in Tarin Kowt all spoke highly of their Afghan allies, the vast majority of whom they regarded as worthy brothers-in-arms. The next claim I want to confront is that the war is not worth the cost. Higher casualty rates do not mean that the war is being lost. They could equally mean that it is being prosecuted more vigorously. The Taliban are finding it more difficult to move around or to directly engage coalition or Afghan troops, so have increasingly resorted to roadside bombs. Since the departure of the Dutch in mid-2010, the Australian Mentoring Task Force, with the same numbers as before, has had a bigger job.

The Howard government originally judged that it was in Australia’s national interest to help evict the Taliban from power and to secure an Afghanistan that would never again grant sanctuary to al-Qaeda. And, to their credit, the Rudd and Gillard governments have made essentially the same call for essentially the same reasons. First, al-Qaeda represented a direct threat to all Western countries, as the September 11 atrocity demonstrated and as subsequent ones confirmed, such as the Bali and London bombings. All up, al-Qaeda has murdered 108 Australians. Al-Qaeda has also been a deadly threat to our country from within, as shown by home-grown terrorist plots, all of which, thankfully, so far have been foiled.

Second, it is in Australia’s enduring national interest to be a reliable ally and friend. It is in our national character not to let down our friends when the need help. It is right that we should support our allies in doing some of the heavy lifting in the struggle against Islamist extremism.

Third, it is consistent with our best values as a nation to back an international effort to remove an oppressive regime and to help establish a freer and fairer political system and a freer and fairer society in Afghanistan, especially for women. I have to say that Afghans are unlikely to become a nation of liberal pluralists or secular humanists any time soon. But that does not mean that they have no wish to be free to choose their own way of life. Their enthusiastic participation in multiparty elections last year, despite lethal intimidation, as well as similar participation earlier in Iraq suggests that the desire for freedom and democracy is not merely a Western conceit. Afghanistan may never be a Western-style pluralist democracy. In any event, it is for Afghans, not for outsiders, to reengineer their society from feudal to the modern, if that is what they want. It is important, though, that their choices should not be made for them by a totalitarian theocracy bent on exporting death to all, with a different notion of God.

Today’s parliamentary statements are a response to understandable public concerns that the results in Afghanistan might not be worth the effort. In fairness to our soldiers and to their families we must count the cost of our continued commitment, but we must also count the cost of prematurely abandoning that mission. Should the international coalition’s mission fail or end too soon, there is a strong risk that Afghanistan would once again descent into feudalism and once again become a base for international terrorism. If the Taliban were able to
reassert control in Afghanistan there would be a high risk that neighbouring Pakistan—a nuclear armed country under great internal pressure from its own extremists—could itself become critically destabilised. That is why it is important that those who support the commitment continue to explain why it is not—I repeat, not—interfering in a faraway struggle that we could safely ignore.

I again place on record the coalition's appreciation of the magnificent work of the Australian forces in Afghanistan. As I had the opportunity to observe again last week, their job is dangerous and difficult, but they undertake it with great skill and resolution. Again and again they have confirmed their reputation as soldiers equal to the world's best. There are many ways to serve our country but probably no finer way—and, I am sure, no tougher way—than to be on active service in the armed forces. I am sure all in this House stand in humble awe of those who put their lives on the line every day for our country.

We mourn the 32 young Australians killed in Afghanistan. They are our finest. We honour them and we will never forget them. We also remember the 213 who have been wounded in the line of duty. Those who have not recovered fully from their injuries must have the best possible support; we must never let them down. Our hearts go out to the families of the dead and the wounded. They do not want their loved one's sacrifices to have been in vain. We best honour these soldiers by securing the victory for which they fought. I also salute the police, diplomats, aid workers and other Australians working hard in Afghanistan to give that country a better future.

I do acknowledge the fact that the Rudd and Gillard governments have maintained their predecessor's commitment in Afghanistan and were even prepared to strengthen that commitment following the withdrawal of most Australian forces from Iraq. Bipartisan support for the commitment is not quite the same as agreeing that nothing could ever be improved. Respectfully, the coalition should speak out in those instances where we feel the commitment could be made more effective.

In my parliamentary address on Afghanistan last year I noted that it would be important to be able to detain suspects beyond 96 hours, as the Americans and the British can. I have to say that our troops on the ground do remain concerned that they are releasing suspects only to have them rejoin the fight against us. So, again, I do respectfully ask the government to consider giving our forces in Afghanistan the capacity to detain terror suspects for at least as long as authorities already can here in Australia. The key element in prolonging the conflict in Afghanistan has been covert support for the Taliban from elements in the Pakistani state. The United States has so far judged that it is better to have an imperfect Pakistan as a partner than to treat it as a pariah. Pakistan indeed has tacitly accepted air attacks against al-Qaeda operatives on its territory and did not over strenuously object to the US raid that killed bin Laden. The Pakistani army has been intermittently effective against the local franchise of the Taliban. On balance, it is best for Australia to maintain cooperative relations through our military training program in Pakistan and I am sure that the government is making every effort to rouse the Pakistanis to their own danger should Taliban safe havens continue to exist and should an insurgency take greater hold in Pakistan too.

I fully understand why a peaceful people would prefer to have our military forces out of harm's way. As far as everyone in this parliament is concerned, I am sure, Australian forces will not stay a day longer than they need to. But they should not leave while they are still needed and wanted. We should be very wary of rushing for the exits and seeing much that has been achieved crumble. Missiles and drones might be able to keep terrorist bases out of Afghanistan but they cannot build roads, they cannot keep schools open and they cannot give women equal rights with men. That requires a commitment on the ground.

Whatever the future holds, there is no doubt that the Australians there have acquitted themselves with courage and professionalism in the very best Anzac tradition. Our armed forces are more than ready to fight for our country but they need to know that it is indeed our country's fight. Our behalf of the Liberal and National parties I give them that assurance.

Mr ALBANESE: I move:

That the House take note of the document.

Question agreed to; debate adjourned.