



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

AFGHANISTAN

Report from Main Committee

SPEECH

Tuesday, 16 November 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Sidebottom, Sid, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr SIDEBOTTOM (Braddon) (1.25 pm)—This is a very difficult issue to speak on for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that we are talking about war, and with war comes destruction, carnage and death. It comes at great cost in both human beings and resources. Australia has now been at war in Afghanistan for nine years, and I think the debate we are having in the parliament now is something we should have had from 2001 onwards in relation both to Afghanistan and to Iraq.

I remember the terrible days of 9-11, when the world stood with the citizens of the US and saw in horror terrorism played out in its most brutal form. The world, including Australia of course, supported action to combat that terrorism and those who had perpetrated the crime. Our involvement, along with many other countries and the UN, with the US in Afghanistan was supported not only by the population of Australia but by the international community. Indeed, it was regarded by most as a legitimate, legal and just war.

The intention most immediately was to attack the cause of the terror that had been perpetrated on September 11—to find and subjugate al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The ruling Taliban's refusal, in the main, to participate in rooting out al-Qaeda and other terrorist elements in Afghanistan at the time proved to be the reason international forces went into Afghanistan, and most people in Australia supported that action. Unfortunately after 2003, when the so-called fight against international terrorism was diverted to Iraq, the original purpose in Afghanistan appeared to be lost. Indeed, it entered into a strategic vacuum. That original intention was basically neglected until 2006 and indeed even further, to 2008.

The international community experienced different conditions in Afghanistan after 2003. In essence, we saw the resurgence of the Taliban and increased military activity, both tribally and nationally. Australia has played its part in seeking to tackle terrorism wherever and however that is possible. One of those means is to provide our contribution to the international forces currently in Afghanistan. Some 1,500 Australian personnel engaged in those activities in Oruzgan Province in particular are facing hostile activities from the Taliban specifically and from other hostile elements. We have lost too many of our young people in this fight against terrorism, in supporting a fledgling

democracy in Afghanistan and in helping to reconstruct this battle-torn country.

Indeed, 21 of our soldiers have been killed and 152 have been wounded in these operations. The Australian public has legitimately asked: what are the reasons for our presence in Afghanistan today? Have we accounted for al-Qaeda? Research would indicate that that depends on how you define al-Qaeda. The general conclusion is that al-Qaeda has morphed to other countries and established itself more substantially in Pakistan than in Afghanistan, and that it uses Pakistan as a staging post for a number of its activities.

What else has emerged is the resurgence of the Taliban while we were participating in the strategic vacuum of Iraq. Now we have a group of people who are ideologically motivated and bring to bear on many of their fellow Afghans little more than suffering, particularly for minority groups and females. They are part and parcel of what is Afghanistan today. There is more and more reason strategically and tactically to accept the fact that, if there is to be such a thing as a 'victory' in Afghanistan, for both common sense and humanity, we have to deal with the Taliban in more than just a military way. We need to work with elements of the Taliban, to bring them to the negotiating table, to be part and parcel of what has, in the end, to be a political solution to the troubles of Afghanistan. I believe that trend will continue to emerge.

In the meantime, what is our role? The Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and many others in this place eloquently and adequately set out both our rationale and the strategy and tactics that we seek to employ in Afghanistan. The first was to try never again to make it a safe haven for terrorists. It could be argued that this fight against terrorism merely redirects terrorist groups to other areas. Indeed, there is strong evidence that many terrorists reside in Pakistan and that unless we deal with the realities that face us and the Realpolitik of what is going on in Pakistan, no effort is going to have any substantial effect. We need to tackle that issue as a community of all nations, auspiced I believe through the UN and supported by the US. We have to deal with the Afghanistan issue as a region.

What a lot of people forget is that something like 50 nations are involved in Afghanistan in

some form or another, providing support militarily, culturally, economically and socially. Until we deal with Afghanistan as part of a region being fed by terrorist activities from the outside, I do not believe we can 'win' in Afghanistan. That is in no way meaning to denigrate the work of Australia and its allies in Afghanistan to date. We have to be very honest about what has been happening there. The Australian involvement in Afghanistan is considerable. We are in a very serious and hostile area militarily as well as socially. Australia's troop deployment and our support for social, culture and economic development in the region are considerable.

There has to be some end point to this conflict and to our involvement. Nobody denies the reality that we are supporting the United States, our ally, in its objectives in Afghanistan. We will continue to do that. As an ally, we will provide material and non-material support for that cause, but at some stage there has to be an end and we need to work towards providing the substance to reach that end.

The decision has been made that in order to have a political solution you need to up the military involvement to try to drive the Taliban and other players to the negotiating table. That is the policy, the strategy, being adopted at the moment. But it is absolutely crucial that, whilst we do that, we also meet our humanitarian obligations to the people of Afghanistan and, in Australia's case, the province of Oruzgan in particular.

One of the most difficult conundrums in all of this is that many scholars of this region, particularly scholars of its culture, its history and the various tribal and ethnic groups in Afghanistan, claim that it is the presence of foreign troops and foreigners in Afghanistan that causes most of the dissent and stops people from coming together to try to negotiate a way out of this—that it in fact brings them together with the most disparate and militant elements. So what we think is homogeneous dissent against foreign involvement is, in fact, people coming from different parts of a spectrum of dislike of the foreign presence.

So there is the conundrum: the longer we stay, some would argue, the worse it is going to get. However, how do you leave without leaving a complete and utter mess? That is the conundrum we are working on. Nobody denies that it is a problem—it is—but we have to deal with it by working genuinely and constructively to make the lives of those who are going to be left behind better.

I think the only solution is going to be a political solution and I think that political solution will be driven not by the gun but by the region. There are players intent on pursuing their own political purposes

in Afghanistan. Until we expose those players and bring them to the table to work out how to arrive at a consensus for Afghanistan, I do not know how we are going to extricate ourselves from there in an honourable way. What I can say, however, is that we need to stay the course, as long as in doing so we pursue our original objectives and as long as we do so in a humanitarian way. We are at war, with all its very serious consequences, and I wish our forces and our personnel well in very dangerous times.