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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Thomson, Kelvin, MP

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Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (8.52 pm)—I acknowledge and congratulate the Greens for their role in initiating this debate on Afghanistan, which I believe is serving an important national objective. It is focusing media and public attention on Australia's role in Afghanistan: why are we there, what are we seeking to achieve and how long are we going to be there? These things ought to be debated, and the nation is richer for this debate. Indeed, it is my view that we should not send troops overseas to war without parliamentary authority or approval. We should amend the Defence Act to require parliamentary approval for the sending of Australian soldiers to war overseas other than in the event of a direct attack on Australia. This parliamentary scrutiny would oblige the executive to provide hard evidence of the threat to Australia, taking us beyond slogans and rhetoric and greatly reducing the chances of another debacle like Iraq. Given the usual complexion of the Senate, this would generally mean the government of the day would have to secure the agreement of one or other non-government political parties to pass its motion. This is as it should be. Going to war is a major matter. It should be a matter of bipartisan, or preferably multipartisan, commitment.

I have reached this conclusion because of my strong aversion to violence. I believe that attacking others can only be justified in self-defence, either because others have attacked you or are about to. It is a basic legal concept and it holds true for relations between countries just as much as it does for relations between human beings.

Let me make it clear at once that I do not have any difficulty with the United States response post September 11, 2001 in Afghanistan. It was clear that the organisers of the September 11 attacks were in Afghanistan and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan refused to do anything to capture them or to hand them over. It gave every impression of being in league with them. It was reasonable for the United States to conclude that if it did not take action in Afghanistan it would be subjected to further attacks. But if an attack has not yet taken place, who decides whether a threat is real and whether the doctrine of self-defence can be justified? Parliament should decide. Safety in numbers—'In the multitude of councillors there is wisdom'.

Now we are in Afghanistan. What now? There is no getting around just what a tough issue this is. I read over the last weekend some of the comments from family members of some of our soldiers who have been killed in Afghanistan—young lives cut short in outrageously abrupt and barbaric ways. Some family members strongly believe Australia must stay on in Afghanistan. One said:

I would feel that it was a waste of our son's life if we pulled out. If you're going in you need to see it through. I think our boys are making a difference and if the politicians all work together this can happen.

Another said:

To just pull out and say it's your problem, you handle it, I just think exposes a vulnerable population to the Taliban. Those who have died trying to support an initiative would have died in vain.

Powerful arguments indeed, delivered with the unique credibility and authority which attaches to a suffering loved one. But then there are family members who say this:

I think the best thing they could do is pull our boys out and let them go home to their families. How many people have got to die before you say it's not in vain?

Or this:

It's a bloody waste of time and effort. My personal thinking is call it quits and come home ... I would hate to see any more of our soldiers being killed.

There are clearly very powerful arguments both ways. How did we get into such a difficult situation? Australia's commitment began in October 2001, the month after the terrorist attack on New York's Twin Towers. But the initial success of the mission in Afghanistan in overthrowing the Taliban and its repulsive leader, Mullah Omar,

gave way to inattention. I try hard these days to avoid the sins of political partisanship and to assess the merits of ideas and policies without regard to their origin. But it is hard to look at where we are in Afghanistan without coming to the conclusion that this mission was done grave, perhaps irreparable, damage by former US President George W Bush and his Republican administration. They shifted the focus from Afghanistan to Iraq. This was a terrible mistake. It detracted from the critically important struggle to capture al-Qaeda leaders.

Furthermore, one of the major reasons for the failure of nation building in Afghanistan and Pakistan was the failure to deal with the issue of drugs. Developing alternative crops and livelihoods was never a serious part of US policy, and debate circled around aerial or ground eradication. In those critical days in 2003, a few thousand more US troops on the ground, more money for reconstruction and a speedier rebuilding of the Afghan army and police may well have turned the tide against the Taliban and enhanced support of the population for the government. Afghan leaders ruefully suggested that the war in Iraq might have diverted US resources away from Afghanistan, but the George W Bush administration ignored their pleas.

When the commander of United States and international troops in Afghanistan, David Petraeus, took over in June, he said:

I don't think that anyone is under any illusion that we're going to turn Afghanistan into Switzerland in five years.

That is fair enough, but the fact is that during the critical years post the overthrow of the Taliban no serious effort was made to turn Afghanistan into a Switzerland. The Taliban was allowed back into the equation and local people became uncertain as to how serious the United States and Western nations were. And the views of the locals are critical in this matter. Local attitudes can be difficult to accurately assess. It has been reported that soldiers are welcomed to a village during the day and praised for their efforts in Afghanistan, only to hear of the same village giving help to Taliban fighters under cover of dark. This might smack of opportunism on the part of Afghan people, but the truth is would we or anyone else be any different given the same circumstances? After all, the penalties for being on the losing side in Afghanistan are savage and extreme. Who can really blame them for having two-bob each way.

The war is now in its deadliest year. Over 580 of the US led International Security Assistance Force have been killed this year. Over 150,000 foreign troops under US and NATO command are fighting a Taliban insurgency that has steadily expanded. I have seen countries bogged down in unwinnable wars before. It happened to the US and us in Vietnam and it happened to the US and us again in Iraq. Indeed, it happened in Afghanistan before, to the Russians. I have come to the conclusion that this war is unwinnable from my own observation of the conflict over nine years now—longer than the Second World War—and I do not want us to go down the failed roads of Vietnam and Iraq. I have also come to this conclusion from reading the work of senior military experts. Major-General Alan Stretton served in World War II, Korea and Malaya, and in Vietnam, where he was the Australia chief of staff in 1969 and 1970. He says the Afghan population 'now sees the war as a foreign invasion of its country'.

Similarly, Brigadier Mark Smethurst, one of Australia's top combat soldiers, has stated that the Taliban tactics have 'overwhelmed' the coalition and they 'cannot be defeated by military means'. He says that we cannot afford to give the Taliban a boost in nuclear armed Pakistan, and I absolutely agree that our strategy in the region must be very much geared to stopping Pakistan falling into the hands of fundamentalists. But in a reflection of the complexity of the politics of the region, Australian National University Professor Amin Saikal has said that Pakistanis are actually backing the Taliban in Afghanistan. Professor Saikal says the US should take the lead in an international conference under US auspices to find a regional consensus on Afghanistan amongst its neighbours. He says that so far no-one has done that. Professor Saikal also observes that the strong presidential system put in place in Kabul must be changed because Afghanistan is too socially divided to make the strong presidential system work.

I believe we need a clear exit strategy from Afghanistan. I agree with former Australian Defence Force chief Peter Gration, who has stated that Australian troops in Afghanistan need an exit strategy based on clear and measurable objectives. General Gration commanded the Australian Defence Force from 1987 to 1993. He said:

Having come this far, we cannot unilaterally walk away, but we should not consider having an open-ended commitment there ...

We've got to have an exit strategy based on a series of measurable outcomes.

He said this could include some clearer benchmarks in areas such as the security situation in Oruzgan, the self-sufficiency of local government, the strength of the economy and the effectiveness of the Afghan army and security forces.

Let me make it clear that in advocating an exit strategy I am not advocating a unilateral withdrawal. I am advocating that we develop an exit strategy in concert with the United States and the other participants in the International Security Assistance Force. I am a firm supporter of the defence alliance with the United States. Moreover, I do not see any reason why consideration for the views of others need act as a barrier to an exit strategy. US President Barack Obama wants American troops to start withdrawing from next July. The Afghanistan conference recently held in Kabul set a timetable for a transition of security arrangements to Afghan authorities by 2014. While that seems to me to be a long way away, and I would like to see a more rapid time frame adopted, the direction is clear. International forces in Afghanistan do not aspire to be there indefinitely, and neither should we. Surely Afghanistan is not some kind of Hotel California where you can check out any time you like but you can never leave. Surely there is an end point beyond which we are not required to continue risking young Australian lives.

Let me turn to two other relevant issues. Clearly our presence in Afghanistan is all about making Australia and the rest of the world safe and secure from terrorist attacks carried out by religious extremists. It seems obvious to me that a clear stumbling block to building a world safe from such attacks is the intransigence of the Iranian regime and its outrageous leader, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Just a few weeks ago Mr Ahmadinejad made bizarre allegations, unsupported by a shred of evidence, that the United States was itself behind the 11 September 2001 attacks. The Iranian regime has a dreadful track record of suppression of women and of human rights, of looking to develop nuclear weapons and of supporting terrorist groups abroad. I do not think that we should attack the Iranian regime; surely this is the lesson of Vietnam and Iraq. But I do not think we should be supporting it either, and yet this is what we and the United States have been doing by outlawing and branding as terrorists a key Iranian opposition group—the PMOI, known in Iran as the Mujaheddin-e-Khalq, or MEK. The Iranian opposition should receive our support and the terrorist listing, which has been withdrawn in England and in Europe, should be withdrawn here.

I also want to make some remarks about Australia's system of military justice. It has been the subject of some public debate recently, with a number of Australian soldiers facing charges following civilian deaths in Afghanistan. There are two kinds of people in the world: there are people who were there and people who were not. Those who were not present have no knowledge of it and would do well to express no views about the guilt or innocence of those whose conduct is now in question. I saw an opinion poll which asked whether Australian soldiers should ever be prosecuted over the deaths of civilians in Afghanistan. I was surprised that the question was asked and even more surprised that the majority of my fellow Australian citizens said no. I am compelled to contest this answer most vigorously. It was established by the Nuremberg war crimes tribunals, after all the brutality and atrocities of the Second World War, which so debased humanity, that war is not a place where anything goes, where civilians are fair game. For example, if army tanks rolled into a city and troops from the safety of that tank were to shoot dead a small unarmed girl standing quietly by the roadside, surely this would be a war crime. Surely it would not matter what the nationality of the troops or that of the small girl was. So I urge all concerned to let the military justice system do its work without hindrance or gratuitous advice. There is no reason to date for a want of confidence in its capacity to arrive at just decisions and outcomes.

Finally, let me express my personal thanks and those of my electorate for the heroism of our soldiers in what we all know are dreadful circumstances. Their bravery and courage, their hardship and privations, are hard for us to comprehend and certainly impossible for us to properly repay. But we sleep better at night for their willingness to defend us and they are often in our thoughts.