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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Mr ROBERT

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(Fadden) (NaN.NaN pm)

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (09 :5 3): I rise to reiterate the coalition's bipartisan support to the government in our nation's fight against extreme Islamic terrorist elements within Afghanistan. I thank the minister for his statement and acknowledge that again he is true to his word to keep the parliament up to date with how our fighting men and women are going and how the military and political strategy is holding its course.

Like the minister, we understand that now the winter snow is thawing and the rocky peaks of Afghanistan once more showing their craggy edges; we understand that insurgents, mostly Afghan Taliban, are now creeping back into the valleys and population centres. By all accounts, Australia's legendary infantry and cavalry patrolling has weakened the insurgents, weakened their hold on the population's sentiments; but we also acknowledge our enemy are tough and they are resilient. We fight where they live. We fight where they have exerted control for many, many years and we know from bitter experience they will not give up easily without a fight. We as a nation know that our fighting men and women will not yield. They will ask no quarter and they will provide none. They will do their duty as they have done for over 100 years. The traditional fighting season has begun. The poppy harvest is wrapping up. Our nation needs to prepare for a hard fight ahead.

As Australians we look from the safety of our homes with a mixture of awe and thanks to the over 1,500 Australian troops in the Afghan theatre and many more in the wider Middle East area of operations, those who have taken the fight to those who would do us harm. I personally thank the mentoring task force based in the 5th Battalion, commanded by my classmate, Lieutenant Colonel Darren Huxley, for their superb service over a very difficult period over Christmas. Many of these men and women are stationed in the forward operating base in Tarin Kowt and in 13 remote patrol bases deep within Oruzgan's numerous valleys. Theirs is an especially tough fight. It is therefore encouraging to hear the minister genuinely use the word 'optimism'. We all know much work needs to be done and we should not fool ourselves into believing that the hardest times have passed. We need to continue to hold our nerve and strengthen our resolve.

The minister quite rightly has reflected that the biggest event since his last statement in March has been the death of the world's No. 1 terrorist and criminal, Osama bin Laden. At its outset it is important to note that his death in itself does not end our fight in Afghanistan; it is merely one more piece, albeit a significant one, in a complicated puzzle. The minister in his update highlighted the reaction of US citizens to the news of the death of Osama bin Laden. He noted the death had particular significance for those affected by the terrible acts carried out on 11 September 2001, in particular for those who lost loved ones in attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, in the Pentagon outside Washington and those who lost their lives on flight 93 in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Indeed it has special significance for all freedom-loving people across the world, but certainly no more than for those who have lost loved ones.

Whilst the global response has been one, I would argue, of relief mixed with a sense of closure, it should be remembered that Al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, has been responsible for the death of over 3,000 people in over 90 countries, responsible for the death of over 100 Australian citizens and numerous more people, particularly thousands of people with a Muslim faith. As such, we understand people's responses will be different. Those personally touched by this degree of evil may feel a degree of closure. Those of us further from the epicentre of this criminal act perhaps breathe a sigh of relief as we acknowledge a world free from one less evil. However, there are those who may seek to use bin Laden's death to further their jihadist calls. For this reason we must not let our gaze slip from the objective of ridding Afghanistan of insurgent elements and the terrorism threat they pose to our way of life.

Naturally, the discussion about the death of bin Laden involves a discussion about Pakistan. I was very pleased to hear the minister echoing the words of our political leaders in urging great caution before drawing any conclusions on Pakistan. It would indeed be unconstructive to withdraw our support from Pakistan, a nation which exists within a region that remains fragile and susceptible to the influence of extremists. The situation in Pakistan is complex. The investigation into bin Laden's ability to hide away in Pakistan remains ongoing. It is important to note Australia has a long history of engaging with Pakistan, from training members of its military in exchange programs through

to aid and development assistance. Long may this constructive relationship with Pakistan continue.

I acknowledge in the budget, and indeed in the minister's announcements, that there is \$1.2 billion for operations in Afghanistan and the wider Middle East area of operations. I also acknowledge the introduction in the past 12 months of the enhanced force protection capabilities and I thank the minister for providing regular updates on those over 40 capabilities and how their introduction into service and into theatre is going. There is still much to do—the minister acknowledges it; we agree—but we note a further \$480 million being spent in the 2011-12 financial year to further these capabilities. Whilst I am yet to personally trial the new Tiered Body Armour System, I have been critical of MCBAS, the modular body armour system previously used. I am led to believe that the new Tiered Body Armour System is a far superior way of using body armour and I look forward to trying it personally. I also look forward to the troops testing this on the ground. Its introduction into service and the speed with which the minister has brought it into service are welcomed. I look forward to its wider introduction across the military, not only into 2 RAR, preparing to deploy, but also to 8/9 and the old faithful 3 RAR, my old battalion, who are subsequently preparing to rotate into theatre. As much training time with new equipment as possible is clearly the preferred option before deploying into a theatre of operation.

The minister spoke about the success of the C-RAM, or counter-rocket artillery and mortar, early warning system installed in Afghanistan to help provide precious seconds of early warning for our fighting men and women. It is a critical system and its installation is welcomed wholeheartedly by the coalition. Again, I am thankful that those opposite did heed the coalition's urgent call to install a C-RAM system, and I certainly thank not only the current minister but also Minister Faulkner before him.

But this does lead me to raise the importance of making capability decisions in the best interests of our front-line force. The last three budgets from the Labor government have deferred and delayed a range of projects worth billions of dollars. Indeed, John Kerin in the *AFR* reported that there had been as much as \$14 billion worth of deferments. However, there are two projects that I particularly wish to bring to the minister's attention, and they are LAND 121 Phase 3 and Phase 4.

They are standout projects because the capability they deliver—protected light and medium/heavy vehicles—is being developed based largely on our tremendous experience using the Bushmaster protected mobility vehicle in Afghanistan. The minister quite rightly

praised the development of the Bushmaster. It has saved numerous coalition lives. Indeed, not a single Australian or coalition soldier has died in an attack or a blast while inside a Bushmaster vehicle. LAND 121 Phase 3 and Phase 4 vehicles are being developed in order to provide our troops on the ground with increased levels of protection within those light to medium/heavy vehicles. There has been significant delay in the preferred tender process for those vehicles, and this is certainly causing us some concern. I therefore urge the minister and the Minister for Defence Materiel to ensure these projects, amongst a raft of other important initiatives, are given priority. Our troops will benefit; there is no question about that.

The government has the support of the opposition for a metrics based, command led staged transition to the ANA over the next four years. We acknowledge that post withdrawal, expected to be fully complete by 2014, a Special Forces or security overwatch role may well be required, in support of a capacity-building and institutional training role. We understand and acknowledge the role of the Provincial Reconstruction Team, and the government enjoys the support of the opposition for the continuing engagement and growth of the PRT. As our troop numbers decline, reconstruction must continue to grow as a basis for any successful counterinsurgency strategy.

We reiterate, as we have done a number of times in the spirit of bipartisanship that the minister knows he enjoys personally from me and from the opposition, that it is our firm view that Commander JTF633 be able to use all of his troops in the Middle East Area of Operation as he sees fit without a cap of 1,550 in Afghanistan. If there must be a cap, let it be on the 2,450 in the MEAO and provide that extra level of flexibility for our commander on the ground.

I note the minister's careful and considered comments in respect of civilian casualties, and we certainly support those comments. Civilian casualties are of course regretted, but I know, speaking on behalf of all parliamentarians, that we stand shoulder to shoulder with our fighting men and women. They fight in a difficult asymmetric conflict. Every effort is made to limit civilian casualties, even though our enemy has been known to use civilians as shields and by all accounts has even encouraged children onto a battlefield knowing full well we will cease fire, as we have done in the past, whilst our enemy continues to engage regardless. We are in a bitter fight. We have a higher standard and thus, rightly, we investigate all claims of civilian death, as the minister has outlined. However, we should not be pressured by outside organisations or give up any sovereignty over these investigative matters. They are rightly matters for the Australian government. We should always vigorously

protect the integrity of our fighting soldiers and give them the benefit of the doubt in difficult and opaque fighting conditions. The welfare of our soldiers on the battlefield should always be our first priority.

I reiterate the statement that I made with regard to detainee management when we last spoke on this matter in the House in March this year. The first priority of the detainee management framework has to be to ensure insurgents are removed from the battlefield and to allow for the most effective extraction of intelligence possible. Furthermore, the coalition will continue to monitor closely, as we are doing now, the range of issues regarding ADF detainee management. I note that we have a purpose-built centre for detainee management, yet we continue to hold detainees for only four days whereas our ISAF partners in war hold detainees for up to 14 days. It is our firm view that this puts us at a disadvantage with respect to extracting vital information and intelligence that is available from some of the detainees that we hold. The current length of time does not allow for full interrogation to obtain all the information that we would seek to use. It does not give enough time for the full assessment of intelligence value, and it may well be having an impact on troop morale. We continue to call on the government to change this policy to bring it into line with our ISAF partners. Under our current domestic laws that respond to terrorism, we can hold suspects in Australia for longer than we can hold them in Afghanistan, where we are fighting a war. This is simply nonsense. I again ask the minister to urgently review these arrangements and provide a timeline for a decision. I also urge the minister to reassess the decision to not allow an interrogation capability to be forward deployed. I believe it is sorely needed, and it would certainly operate within all of our international obligations, treaties and conventions. It would bring us into line with our ISAF partners. In conclusion, I thank the minister for being true to his word by providing the House with this update, which covers a raft of issues in considerable detail. The minister knows that he enjoys strong bipartisan support for our engagement and fight in Afghanistan. He enjoys strong bipartisan support for the mission and particularly for the welfare of our troops and the welfare of their families back at home. I also join the minister in taking this opportunity to remember those 23 Australians who have lost their lives fighting for their country and for the vision of a world free of terrorism. I commend those 169 Defence Force personnel who have been wounded while serving in action. We will, as we have said on numerous occasions, continue to hold the government to account as the situation dictates. This is the role of a responsible opposition. But the minister knows that he will enjoy our bipartisan support as we go forward.

I agree with the minister that we must continue to hold our nerve, maintain the courage of our convictions and hold the course. There is a plan. It is a set mission. It is articulated. There is a timeline for handover to the ANA based on metrics and command and this course should be held. We must achieve our aim of strengthening our national security, which is the absolute basis upon which we have deployed forces to Afghanistan. And while we must steel ourselves for possible further losses as we enter another fighting season and possible retaliation from those who seek to undermine our very way of life, we must also acknowledge the great successes that we have achieved to date and the steadily increasing security that is being provided to everyday Afghans because of the hard work of our men and women in uniform. Our fighting men and women enjoy the opposition's highest regard and, I am sure, our nation's greatest thanks.