



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

**Afghanistan**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 13 October 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

---

## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 13 October 2011  
**Page** 11793  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Mr ROBERT

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

(Fadden) (NaN.NaN pm)

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (09:16): I thank the Minister for Defence for honouring his word and for continuing to keep this parliament informed on the progress of combat operations in Afghanistan. Indeed, true to the minister's word, this is his fourth update this year, building on updates in March, May, 7 July and of course today.

It is important that we in the coalition restate our very strong bipartisan support to the government in the prosecution of war against Islamic terrorism and insurgency within Afghanistan. It is also important to state that this support is not borne of necessity but of conviction. We believe, as we always have, that the maxim that 'all it takes for evil to prosper is for good men to do nothing' holds true. And good nations, Australia included, will continue to join with 47 other freedom-loving countries of the world to raise this standard high.

El Salvador's recent commitment to the fight is encouraging and demonstrates that the majority of the true democratic countries of the world are now standing shoulder to shoulder in Afghanistan. This global bipartisanship has one over-arching goal—to ensure that insurgent elements within Afghanistan can no longer use that country to extend their hate and violence across the free world. I join with the minister in acknowledging that this is indeed within our national interest. This fight in Afghanistan that we have been engaged in for so many years is in our national interest, and the coalition will not shirk our responsibility in this regard.

Australia's mission within Afghanistan remains limited and discrete. Principally, the mentoring task force—currently mentoring task force 3, based on the infantry battalion commanded by Colonel Smith—is training and mentoring the Afghan National Army, principally the 4th Brigade, in elements of the Afghan National Police. We are currently providing a substantial special operations task group—indeed, the third largest contingent of special operations currently in theatre. We provided limited rotary wing and heavy-lift support and of course a range of imbedded officers to a range of joint ISAF commands.

However, the major tasks of training and mentoring the ANA and disrupting, dismantling and destroying the insurgency through the use of the SOTG remains hard going. Be under no doubt that this enemy is tough and resilient. There is little tangible sign at present that they are ready to give in or indeed to negotiate. The minister talks of being 'confident of the good progress that is being made'. We hope and pray that his confidence is right. We certainly join him in sharing a cautious optimism but also acknowledge that there is much to do before a handover to full Afghan National Army commander control across the province in 2014. Regardless, the minister can rely on the opposition's support in this critical task.

I note recent media reports citing comments from the current Australian Commander of Joint Task Force 633, Major General Angus Campbell, that the ANA will require substantial support post 2014 to be truly ready to plan and conduct operations. Notwithstanding any comment on the veracity of those reports, it is important to note that our commander, Major General Campbell, is an experienced and respected commander, and the coalition has always held to the view that the ADF drawdown must be metrics based and command judgment led. Indeed, the minister has previously stated that a metrics based drawdown will be the order of the day.

The coalition therefore acknowledges and accepts that our nation will maintain a logistics, training and special force element in overwatch within Afghanistan post the 2014 substantial drawdown. This will include elements of the provincial reconstruction team and may include capacity-building elements in governance, electoral matters and administration. It is important that we understand that a nation such as Afghanistan, still on its knees, needs its friend's hand until that nation can firmly get on its feet. We will not abandon Afghanistan. We have expended much treasure, much toil and much blood fighting to ensure that the world can enjoy freedom from those who would seek to do it harm. So the fight ahead will be hard. The high-profile attacks against former President and Chairman of the High Peace Council, Professor Rabbani, and the increase in suicide in Kabul are a case in point. These attacks mark a tactical change in the insurgent engagement in high-value public killings. As a people in this country, as Australians, we universally and utterly condemn the suicide attacks and the numerous assaults on innocent

civilians. A cowardly enemy that resorts to appalling tactics on children is an enemy that deserves to be defeated.

In my previous response to the minister in this place I remarked that of the over 30 forward-operating bases and patrol bases the vast bulk, indeed, as many as 22 or 23, are manned only by Afghan National Army soldiers. If the MTF is on track to increase this number to 26 by mid-2012, as the minister stated, and that Australian Defence Force personnel will man only four, this will be a real achievement. The ink blot approach of providing security across the population centres in Oruzgan province would appear to be linking up. The move towards mobile mentoring teams to provide assistance to the ANA kandaks is a positive step. We are cautiously optimistic.

I make the point that MTF 3 has done an outstanding job in building on the work of MTF 2. MTF 2 did a substantial amount of work in finding a range of caches and removing weapons systems and IED components from the battlefield. MTF 3 has built on this brilliantly. The Taliban has not regained any substantial initiative or indeed combat capability whilst MTF 3 has been in theatre. Indeed, all indications are that the average life expectancy of a Taliban commander who dares to enter Oruzgan is no more than five days, with the majority of commanders seeking to stay in refuge in Pakistan and to issue orders to their underlings and soldiers from the safety of that area. It does not take a rocket scientist to realise that young Taliban soldiers are not particularly impressed with their commanders hiding in Pakistan.

We certainly welcome the new deputy CTU, Colonel Ben James, a colleague of mine, and thank the previous deputy commander of CTU, Colonel Smith, for his tremendous work in being the second-in-command of ostensibly a brigade sized response within Oruzgan.

In July this year, in the third of the ministerial responses, the minister noted that the first provincial transitions in the north of Afghanistan were occurring. Something like 25 per cent of the population, by the end of July and early August, was actually being protected by full Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police control. There is every indication that President Karzai will seek to announce the second in a range of provincial handovers in the coming weeks. This may take the Afghan command and control of provinces up to 50 per of the country. It is certainly a welcome move.

It is important to note also that a coalition government will continue to reach out to Pakistan and support Pakistani counterterrorism and military efforts to improve security within that country and indeed the region. We will continue to provide the very best officer training at the Royal Military College,

Duntroon, and stand ready to provide further support to Pakistan if required. Our nation's support post the floods in 2010 in Pakistan is testimony to our enduring concern for Pakistan and its people. Pakistan and Australia are not just good cricket sparring partners; we are friends. We are friends who also acknowledge the complexities of Pakistan, and we certainly join the international community in encouraging Pakistan to do whatever they can to continue to disrupt the insurgent elements within their borders.

I thank the minister for the equipment improvements that have been going into the theatre in Afghanistan since July. Moving the Giraffe, the counter rocket, artillery and mortar system, further into patrol bases is a substantial and good move that provides real and tangible benefits. The work in digger works in actually providing a colonel, in this case Colonel Blain, to oversee the equipment improvement that soldiers would seek to have is another good move, as is a range of the other equipment being put into theatre.

I acknowledge the Minister for Defence Materiel for his work in looking at greater Australian content and putting some teeth into the priority industry capability of defence apparel and ensuring that boots, clothes and hats are majority Australian content. I also call on the minister to widen that to include body armour, helmets and a range of combat clothing and accessories. A core competency of us as a manufacturing nation must be to outfit our combat soldiers on the ground with the very best of equipment.

I thank the minister for his continued updates on detainee management. Over the last three and four times we have spoken in this House on this matter I have continued to reiterate to the minister that our detainee management policy has to mirror that of our coalition partners. At present, we can only detain those within Afghanistan for four days, whereas our coalition partners can detain for periods in excess of that. It is interesting to note that under Australian domestic terror laws we can actually detain for longer than four days. I would hope that the minister would continue to look at adjusting detainee management policy to bring the amount of time that Australian forces can detain those on the battlefield in line with our coalition partners.

I join the minister in acknowledging the tragic loss of 29 soldiers in combat operations in Afghanistan. Since we both last spoke in this place on this matter, Private Matthew Lambert has been tragically killed. In August in this House we appropriately and properly paid condolences to Private Matthew Lambert, his family and his friends. I made the point that, when Private Lambert arrived in Afghanistan as part of MTF 3, his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Smith, addressed the soldiers and said to them, 'You haven't

yet earned the right to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the soldiers of MTF 2, but you will. I am confident that we will build on their successes and that each and every one of you will work hard to emulate and expand on their achievements.'

I went on further to say that Private Lambert's unstinting service earned him the right to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with any in our grand military heritage, because he served in the most remote part of the province, in Patrol Base Anaconda in the Khas Oruzgan Valley. He served in the rough, in areas barely accessible by vehicle. He patrolled the valleys on foot, he manned the battlements and he mentored the Afghan soldiers he lived and fought with. He did everything asked of him in some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth, and he did it at night, in the rain, in the cold, in the heat and in the dust. Private Lambert embodied everything the 2nd Battalion is known for. Duty first. We know his deeds, and today we honour his name—a name known not only by us but known by a family who loved him, by a regiment who trained him, by the men who fought with him, by the medic who cradled him, by the pilot who flew him and by the doctors and nurses who did everything to save him. This is the great military that serves us today in our name. These are the great men and women in combat operations in Afghanistan that seek to fight for freedom where terrorism is simply a byword. They deserve our nation's absolute and enduring support.

I also acknowledge the loss of two brave soldiers from New Zealand from across the trench, and as a nation we mourn with that country.

It is important that we do not lose heart and do not lose resolve. I say to the government and echo the words of the previous joint task force commander in 2010: Minister, in government do not get the wobbles. You enjoy strong bipartisan support. You have a competent and exceptionally well-trained military. You have great commanders on the battlefield and also back here at home. You have some of the finest and most courageous soldiers, sailors and air men and women anywhere in the world. Hold the line and finish the job.