



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Afghanistan

SPEECH

Monday, 15 November 2010

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Monday, 15 November 2010 Page 151 Questioner Speaker Rishworth, Amanda, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (4.34 pm)—I welcome this opportunity to speak on the statement by the Prime Minister on Afghanistan. The decision to go to war should be the hardest decision that any government should have to make. This decision to put our men and women in harm's way is one that I believe that this government has not taken—and should never take—lightly. Our mission in Afghanistan is both dangerous and difficult. Australia has paid a high price. We should never forget that 21 Australians have lost their lives serving Australia in Afghanistan. I cannot imagine the anguish and despair of losing a loved one in combat and I would like to put on the record my profound sympathy for those families and loved ones who have.

But, in spite of this mission being both dangerous and difficult, I do support the government's commitment in Afghanistan and believe it is an important commitment that must be maintained. In this age of global terrorism, our work in Afghanistan is necessary. If terrorists harboured by the Taliban were allowed to regroup in Afghanistan, the security of Australians both at home and abroad would be in jeopardy.

September 11 2001 was a stark reminder of the realities of terrorism. The more recent attacks in Jakarta and Bali serve as a grim reminder that terrorism is not confined to the Middle East, the Americas or Europe. Australia's commitment to the mission in Afghanistan is dedicated to minimising the threat of terrorism, rectifying human rights abuses in Afghanistan and ensuring the development of a stable and secure Afghanistan. Inaction and withdrawal by coalition troops will arguably lead to a power vacuum which would be filled by non-state actors, extremists and radicals, further hampering the Afghan people's efforts to establish themselves as a viable nation-state.

Recently the UN Security Council unanimously renewed the International Security Assistance Force's mandate in Afghanistan. The UN has affirmed its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan. This is an important point. The mission in Afghanistan is not a unilateral decision of any one country but a multilateral commitment made by the international community with 47 countries acting under this mandate.

This debate on the Prime Minister's statement has been extremely comprehensive. Many previous speakers have outlined in detail the objectives and details of our mission in Afghanistan. Therefore I am not going to repeat what many of my colleagues have already placed on the record. But I do want to comment on the importance of providing support to our troops and their families. There is no denying that the recent past has been an exceptionally tough period for our troops in Afghanistan. On a daily basis they face dangerous conditions. The threat of improvised explosive devices is ever present. Afghanistan is a place where any rock or tin can may be one of these explosive devices and where enemy combatants do not wear uniforms. Our troops face a dangerous environment, a compromising terrain and an arid climate with scorching days and cold nights. Our troops are exposed to constant turmoil and threat: 156 Australians have been physically wounded in the war in Afghanistan, which has left them with the physical scars of war. But there are also the scars that we cannot see. History has shown us that the psychological toll of combat can also be debilitating. Both physical and psychological wounds can have a long-lasting impact. For many of our troops in Afghanistan this is not their first deployment. Many have been on multiple deployments not just in Afghanistan in recent years but also to East Timor and Iraq. Many of our troops in Afghanistan have been exposed to near misses and witnessed their mates injured or even killed.

It does not matter how resilient, capable or trained our soldiers are; these conditions will take their toll. For some it may result in mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder is believed to develop as the result of a human brain not completely processing a traumatic event. The results of this are debilitating and include invasive memories, hypervigilance, nightmares, loss of concentration, guilt and irritability. Therefore, post-traumatic stress disorder is an inevitable side effect of war that some of our troops may suffer from. As a government and as a society, we must ensure that our troops who serve our country get the support they need when they need it. We must ensure that there are no barriers for our defence personnel in obtaining mental health treatment.

A study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2004 found that stigma associated with seeking treatment for mental health disorders was a significant barrier to American soldiers and marines returning from Afghanistan and Iraq accessing treatment. In fact the study reported that service personnel who were most in need of treatment for mental health issues did not access services because of the stigma associated with receiving care. Since then there have been a variety of studies confirming that stigma continues to be a barrier to military personnel seeking treatment for mental health issues. This is concerning because accessing help for conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues should not be viewed by service personnel or anyone else as embarrassing or a weakness.

We know that addressing mental health issues can significantly improve the lives of those affected. Studies have also shown that addressing mental health issues can increase retention of personnel in the defence forces. As a government and a community we need to ensure that everything is being done to support those service personnel who are affected by mental health issues and work to reduce any stigma that may exist about accessing help, both within our defence forces and in our wider society.

We must not make the mistake that we did when previous war veterans returned home. Many have told me they were provided with little recognition of and support for their physical and mental health difficulties. The Vietnam War saw many soldiers return to Australia with no real support. They were expected to come back and just get on with life. Many were not offered support, understanding or the opportunity to talk about their experiences. For some, this led to lifelong issues that have been debilitating and have severely impacted their quality of life for decades. For many it took years to get help for some of the issues they were experiencing. Therefore providing prevention and early intervention services for our personnel is critical.

I am pleased that the Gillard government has taken the area of mental health in our armed forces seriously. Upon election in 2007 the government initiated a review of mental health care in the Australian Defence Force and transition to non-military life. The government accepted the majority of recommendations in this report. I have been advised by Minister Snowdon's office that the Department of Defence department is now implementing these recommendations, with the enhancement of the ADF mental health workforce being the main priority.

It is not only service personnel who are affected by deployment to Afghanistan and other war zones. It is the families as well whom we should not forget when our service personnel are deployed. My brother is an Air Force pilot and has served in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and I have seen the anxiety and stress that those deployments have had on my family, especially my mother. The anxiety and stress that family members suffer is real. For some families the worst-case scenario they fear does indeed occur and they lose a loved one. We need to make sure that families in this worst-case scenario get all the support they deserve. Ensuring that families are prepared for their loved ones to be deployed has been found to be a very important factor in improving the family's resilience. Ensuring there is support for soldiers and their families upon their return is also critical. Some of our Defence Force personnel may have difficulty readjusting to their lives in Australia after returning from deployment, and it is important that once again the appropriate support is available for them and, importantly, their families as well.

Our mission in Afghanistan is a difficult and dangerous one. It is a mission that I believe we should not abandon. If coalition forces were to withdraw there could be serious consequences for global security. Our troops in Afghanistan are doing a professional job on the ground but, as I have said, it is dangerous. It is important that while we continue our work in Afghanistan we do not forget that this mission could have a significant impact on our personnel on the ground and their families. We must support them.