



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**MOTIONS**

**Afghanistan**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 23 August 2021**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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| <b>Questioner</b>                      | <b>Responder</b>     |
| <b>Speaker</b> Kitching, Sen Kimberley | <b>Question No.</b>  |

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**Senator KITCHING** (Victoria) (17:54): [by video link] I would like to contribute to the motion on Afghanistan moved by Senator Payne this afternoon. It's now nearly 20 years since the US led intervention in Afghanistan that followed the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States. Having been to Ground Zero on Christmas night that year, I watched and spoke to people who had lost loved ones on that terrible day. They wandered aimlessly that Christmas night next to the safety fencing around the Twin Towers site seeking closeness at Christmas, except, of course, their loved one was no longer there. By an act of evil they had been killed, so the coalition of democracies went in to prevent the Taliban from continuing to protect and shelter those terrorists. That intervention overthrew the oppressive Taliban regime and gave the people of Afghanistan, at least in theory, the possibility of democratic government, the expansion of human rights, particularly for women, and social and economic progress.

Today, as we stand in this place or connect remotely to talk to this motion, it is with great despair and with great sadness that we note that the Taliban regime is back in control in Afghanistan. Since 2001 more than \$2 trillion has been spent on military operations in and economic aid to Afghanistan. Twenty years of intermittent warfare have taken an estimated 250,000 lives, with 2,353 US military personnel having perished alongside 41 members of the Australian Defence Force. We will never forget their sacrifice and we will always honour them. We know that 66,000 Afghan military personnel also died trying to create a safer country for their children and for that next generation. This, however, is not the whole story.

There is also a much more positive story to tell about the past 20 years in Afghanistan. Here, it is important for us to remember that Australia was a force for good in Afghanistan. We are all thinking of the 39,000 men and women of the Australian Defence Force, what they contributed and what they sacrificed. Indeed, there are many in this place and the other place who have served our country in the Defence Force and continue to serve in the parliament. During our engagement, Afghanistan saw the most sustained period of economic and social progress in its entire history—in fact, this has been the only sustained period of economic and social progress in the country's history.

Almost two-thirds of Afghanistan's people are aged under 25. They are the best educated generation in the country's history, particularly those among the rapidly growing urban population. Most of them have little to no memory of the Taliban years. But they know from their families' histories how much worse, how much more fearful, life at that time was for everyone, particularly young people and especially young women. There seem to be green shoots of a view, at least from young people today in Afghanistan who do not wish to live under the restrictions of Taliban rule and who do not wish to have liberties which have become normal for them over the last decade removed from them. Of course, there are also now those in the Panjshir Valley.

Countries like ours have a responsibility to deal with the situation that has arisen in Afghanistan. The best way we can fulfil that obligation right now, as the situation on the ground in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate, is to help evacuate those who worked with our defence forces, diplomatic community and aid organisations as well as their families and those who supported our efforts in Afghanistan over the last 20 years. Many are now in immediate danger. Of course, this should be done with consideration for the existing security and immigration vetting processes that are in place. No reasonable person is suggesting otherwise. I note that many of these efforts are currently underway and that we have already evacuated hundreds of individuals out of Afghanistan. I keep looking at the photographs from Kabul airport. I've arrived and departed through both the military and the civilian sides of that airport. It is unrecognisable, with the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, with young soldiers trying to give water, shelter, indeed humanity in this dire situation, and this is why we have an obligation to the people of Afghanistan, to those whose faces are filled with desperation while pressed up against the walls at Kabul airport.

For each one of them we know there are many more who are hiding at home because we have held out the normal freedoms of our country. We cannot now yank that hand back; it would be dishonourable. These people

risked their lives to assist us and work with us. It would be a national disgrace if we were to abandon them now to the terrifying revenge of their enemies. Even worse, it would be a failure on the part of the democratic countries if we were just to sidle off into the night. I'd like to thank the government ministers and their offices and departments who have been working around the clock on this. I would like to thank them personally. I also thank my colleagues who have been making representations on behalf of many in Afghanistan.

Normally, when someone in a leadership position makes a commitment, one takes them at their word. The Taliban have guaranteed that they will give safe passage to civilians who want to leave. The international community will be watching closely and will hold them to that commitment. Their own Pashtunwali should also. In addition to this, helping the Afghan people will take many different forms. We should work with the UN agencies, the United States, the European Union, Britain and India, and with international aid organisations, all of which have long histories of involvement in Afghanistan, to provide funds and resources to Afghan civil society, particularly to women's and children's organisations. We should continue to work with and keep looking for those elements of the Afghan state which seem most likely to uphold human rights and resist a return to the past.

In William Dalrymple's definitive history, *Return of a King*, about the First Anglo-Afghan War in the mid-1800s, Mirza Ata Mohammad, a very witty and clever writer of the period, quotes a Persian proverb: 'Those once bitten by a snake fear even a twisted rope.' We should reflect upon those words over the coming weeks.