

THE HON. JOE VOLPE, P.C., M.P.
SPEECH ON LIBERAL OPPOSITION DAY MOTION ON AFGHANISTAN
APRIL 8, 2008

Mr. Speaker, we have quite an extraordinary motion before the House today on an opposition day. We need to think about this for a moment. The Official Opposition has decided to use the opportunity of an opposition day to bring the government to a realization of the full impact of what it agreed to do more than a month ago.

A month ago the government agreed to accept the official opposition's suggestion of compromise and direction with a view to providing purpose to our position in Afghanistan. It is a position that has consumed the public attention for five and more years now but most particularly in this year, after we have seen the fatalities mount to 82 of our soldiers and after everyone is seized with the idea of ensuring that any Canadian participation value the lives of those men and women who offered themselves up for the purpose of ensuring that all those values that are Canadian be recognized, implemented and valued everywhere around the world. That is what has been at the basis of our debate and what has been the foundation stones of all of our positions on what Canada will do, militarily or otherwise, in Afghanistan.

As we know, the government, using language that mothers might have thought differently, decided to extend the mission and ask for parliamentary approval. The government did that in 2006. What it really meant was that it wanted to turn the mission from one that it primarily was intended to be, a reconstruction and development mission, into one where there would be war fighting, and there were justifications. I am not here to revisit the history of that debate but suffice it to say that next year the mandate would have to be to either renewed or abandoned.

The government, to its credit, said that there would be a debate in the House of Commons and that debate did take place. The official opposition, as well as the other opposition parties, pointed out all of the requirements that needed to be satisfied in order to at least give the Canadian public a sense that it was participating in a real debate on the merits of being part of the Afghan mission.

We compromised a great deal. From a personal point of view, I gave a position that said no, but parties collectively came forward and, with the collective wisdom of their caucuses, they arrived at a position that was worthy of statesmanship for the country.

What did my party, the official opposition, do? It presented a motion that, happily, was absorbed, adopted and implemented by the government almost in its entirety. It said, and this is not usual in a parliamentary environment, that it preferred the Official Opposition's approach to our presence in Afghanistan and that it would present that position as its own in the House of Commons for all the parties to either accept or reject.

The result was that the Official Opposition accepted. However, the mainstay of that motion included a commitment by the government and this House that there would be the establishment of a committee of parliamentarians that would provide the oversight, an omission that has caused such great concern in the country.

All Parliamentarians in the House agreed that the government would establish an all party committee that would provide oversight and cooperation with the three line departments most immediately implicated in the Canadian experience in Afghanistan, specifically the Minister of Foreign Affairs and his department, the Minister of National Defence and his department, and the Minister of International Cooperation, CIDA.

Here we are a month later, decisions being made on Afghanistan, our role in the world being debated in Bucharest and elsewhere, our commitment to international development and reconstruction ongoing and our contribution militarily still being determined on an ad hoc basis and no committee.

One might take exception to the composition of a committee that would fall out of the normal practices of Parliament but one cannot take lightly the idea that the House, the government, the opposition would agree to a motion, asked for by the government itself, to create a committee that would provide the coordination, the oversight and one that would review the laws and procedures governing the use of operational and national security exceptions for the withholding of information from Parliament, the courts and the Canadian people, with those responsible for administering those laws and procedures, and to ensure that Canadians are being provided with ample information on the conduct and the progress of the mission.

We should be outraged that the government has yet to move in the direction of implementing such a committee. Today's motion is there to offer the government an opportunity to do what it had committed to do on the floor of the House and with the support of opposition parties.

It was not something that was done willy-nilly. Mr. Speaker, I notice that you are listening very attentively to the reasons why we came to that position.

The government claimed that it needed to get the public on side on Afghanistan and our mission therein, so it commissioned a panel of experts. That panel suggested, among several other things, first, that we ensure the world recognizes our input and that it come forward with an additional 1,000 troops, otherwise we would not continue our mission. One thousand troops, a 40% increase in the number of troops that we have deployed in Afghanistan and specifically in Kandahar province.

The government accepted that recommendation and said that this was its line in the sand. If we cannot get the rest of the world to accept our contribution and recognize its value, then we shall opt out. That was part of the debate.

The Prime Minister and his ministers lauded left and right everywhere around the country the fact that a panel of experts said that we would make our mission contingent upon the contribution of an additional 1,000 troops.

It appears that we finally have them. I do not know whether that will solve all the problems but it is not for me to judge, at least not today. I am sceptical, but the government said that was one of the conditions and, in accepting the motion, it also said that it would allow itself to be monitored by this parliamentary committee so that the achievements, the objectives and the goals that would be aimed at with this additional group that would buttress the Canadian presence militarily, that would always be present in the House, and that the Canadian public, through its elected representatives and always in conjunction with those three line departments, would have an up to date view of the progress of the mission that very few in Canada applaud wholeheartedly.

They are not anti-military. They are not anti-troops. They are for the achievement of objectives that are clearly stated, clearly outlined and systematically put in place.

The second objective the government said had to be met in order for us to continue the extension of the mission was the achievement of greater operational lift, and that is helicopters to move our troops from point A to point B. It appears we have moved in some direction toward achieving that objective and to satisfying that condition. However, we still do not have an oversight committee of Parliament to ensure that be done, just as we cannot be sure it will achieve the other condition of securing the appropriate armoured vehicles to transport our troops in safety from point A to point B.

I have spoken only for a brief moment on the military component of the mission. It is a military component that very tragically has resulted, at least for Canada, in the highest rate of fatality of all countries, specifically of countries that continue to make a military contribution exceeding 2,000 armed personnel. The fatality rate is 3%. The other countries combined have 1.4%. Even the United States with all of its troops has a fatality rate of 1.7%.

What concerned us was the safety of our troops. We are putting them in the line of fire in a dangerous environment. We wanted to ensure that, at the very least, we could provide them with the technology they required in order to achieve an objective and also the technology necessary to provide them security in a dangerous environment. It has not happened. We are not sure. We do not have the parliamentary committee that the government promised on accepting that motion. It seems perhaps that it is unprepared to move in tandem with the goodwill of the House to achieve national objectives.

The other thing that concerned us was the presence of Canada in the greater Middle East. It is a part of the world so far away from Canada that it barely achieves the attention of those who hold Canadian values dear. The government, through the expert panel, pointed out that to date we had collectively spent, as citizens of this country, in excess of \$6 billion through our military presence. Some people would say it would be money better spent if we wanted to change the world.

This is only our contribution and that amount of money increases on a yearly basis. In fact, there is an estimate, and I suspect it came from the government because it came through the usual unnamed sources for military writers, that by the time we end up in 2012, we will have spent about \$18 billion in Afghanistan. Some might say that is a fantastic amount of money just for one country. That money is well worth it if it achieves the objective we have laid out for ourselves. It is an absolute waste if it achieves nothing.

To give some idea of how fabulous that amount of money would be, it is only \$2 billion less than the entire GDP of Afghanistan. This is an enormous amount of money for one country to contribute militarily, for security purposes.

We are not there as a conquering nation. We are there, as the government has said, to provide security for our other approach. Our other approach is one of development. Unfortunately, according to the government, we have spent to date only \$600 million on development aid and reconstruction. We are spending something like \$12 on military and defence initiatives for Afghanistan for every \$1 we spend in development aid. Yet I am sure all members on the government side would say that if we could achieve our objectives through development aid and reconstruction, then those dollars would be very well spent.

Members on this side agree we would spend more. Six hundred million dollars does not appear to be a fabulous sum when the objectives are as noble as those that we outlined for ourselves in Afghanistan. We wanted this committee to ensure those funds would achieve the objectives that we outlined for ourselves. Because 50¢ out of every one of those dollars, that is \$300 million, goes to UN agencies. We do not spend it there. Another 35¢ out of every dollar goes directly to Afghan national institutions to ensure they begin to develop the culture of government servicing the people. Only 15¢ per dollar of contribution is left.

We on this side of the House asked for a committee to ensure there would be adequate coordination between our defence objectives and our development objectives, and that committee is not here yet. The government has perhaps thought that now the debate has spent its force, we do not need to look at what it should do. All we want to happen is for the government to respect the will of Parliament and ensure that this committee be in place, so all of those defence and development reconstruction efforts are coordinated, not just where Canada sits, but perhaps as well, according to the independent panel, that other countries move in a coordinated effort to transform a society that generates a lot of the concerns that have caused the fear and paranoia worldwide. Whether it has been justified is another story, but that is the basis for this.

The third reason why we wanted this committee, the third rationale, which was buttressed as well by that independent panel, was there had to be greater diplomatic efforts. Foreign affairs needed to be much more engaged in what was going on in Afghanistan, where our allies, and there are many, were operating on their own agenda. For example, there is a country adjacent to Afghanistan, a country whose cooperation is absolutely crucial for the success, however limited or however superior to any nation or combination of nations in Afghanistan, and that would be Pakistan.

Ten of the provinces in Afghanistan border Pakistan. There are twice as many Taliban operating in some of the border provinces of Afghanistan than there are operating in the rest of Afghanistan. A lot of the activities that we know are there are dependent on the cooperation that we get from Pakistan. Seventy per cent of our material and human resources go into Afghanistan through Pakistan.

It makes sense for a coordinated effort on the part of Canada of those three departments. All we asked for on this side of the House was cooperation by the government in instituting an all party committee, which it would chair, to ensure the coordination of all these issues and departments would reflect the intention of Canadians, as expressed through their members of Parliament in the House, and moved and accepted by the government.

All we want, through this motion today, is the transparency and the openness that the government opposite offered all Members of Parliament a month ago when we gave it the okay to continue in Afghanistan.

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RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON HIS SPEECH

Mr. Speaker, I deliberately moved away from ad hominem attacks or snide comments regarding political partisanship and organization. Why? Not because I am unable to do that, but because I think this is a topic and an issue that requires the appropriate gravitas from anyone who engages in it.

The issues, as I might remind the Member opposite, are twofold. First, as I said, is the question of completing a commitment made in a motion that was accepted by the House, and it has not happened yet. We are asking for it to be done. Second, is to remind all people of the substance of the issue itself, without having taken a position. That position has already been determined by the House.

What we have done is present a motion that asks the government to recognize all the serious elements associated with the Canadian position in Afghanistan. If the member opposite would like me to review them for him, I shall be pleased to do so.

I caution that this is a serious topic. The only responsibility that Members here ought to take is whether they will comply with the will of Parliament, which was expressed in a non-partisan fashion and, as both the Prime Minister and the leader of the official opposition said, in a truly Canadian statesman like fashion. It is a Canadian position that needs to be committed to and fulfilled as per Parliament's request a month ago. We cannot wait much longer.