

Hon. Jim Abbott: 

Mr. Speaker, I will conclude my comments.

The second thing is that the NDP wants to slow down the EI bill so that we can remain in the House, which is a good thing because, indeed, that is what the Conservatives and the Prime Minister want to do.

That said, having raised the cover as to why this is happening, I would like the parliamentary secretary again to underscore why in the world the NDP thinks that we can achieve the rebuilding of Afghanistan without first creating security for the people of Afghanistan.



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Mr. Deepak Obhrai:  

Mr. Speaker, that is a question everybody is asking: How does the NDP expect development to take place when there is no security? In the meantime, the NDP wants us to withdraw, providing an insecure environment.

Events are taking place in Pakistan and Afghanistan even now and reports are saying it is a difficult mission and the insurgency is gaining ground. All of this indicates why it is important to ensure there is a secure environment and that the Afghan national army is built so that it can take care of its own country and destiny.



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Hon. Bob Rae (Toronto Centre, Lib.):  

Mr. Speaker, I want to express my thanks to the member for Ottawa Centre and my colleague, the parliamentary secretary, for participating in this discussion.

Historians will argue for generations the reasons that the New Democratic Party moved the motion on this particular day, and I do not take anything away from that. It is important for the House to take the opportunity to reflect on the Afghan mission and, certainly, if there are families of soldiers whose lives are at risk and families of those who have made the ultimate sacrifice, we, as members of Parliament, owe it to them to provide some reflection on the mission in Afghanistan.

First of all, as a member of the Liberal Party, when I participated in some discussions before I was elected to the House with respect to the mandate of the mission, I appreciated very much the efforts that were made by the Prime Minister and others to involve a number of people in those discussions. I certainly have never regarded this mission as a matter of partisan politics or as a matter of partisan debate. There is no more important decision for a member of Parliament, indeed for a government and certainly for a prime minister, than the decision with respect to Canada's putting its military and civilian operations in a theatre of conflict, putting their lives at risk and asking them and their families to make the ultimate sacrifice. When we go back to our constituents and we argue and debate these questions, it is not a matter of political philosophy or a matter of abstract ideology; it is a matter of very real questions for the people of Canada and certainly for those families.

Those who were in the House last week would know that I did not hesitate to give what I hoped would be a fairly lively partisan intervention in a debate on the confidence motion. This will be a very different kind of intervention, simply because of the nature of the subject, and I appreciate the opportunity to do so.

It is important for the House to continue to keep its eye and focus on the most important and difficult questions which we have. The first one is that while we as a country have this debate, we should never make the mistake of thinking that this is somehow a conflict in which Canada alone is involved. There are over 40 members of the United Nations that are engaged in some way or other with respect to their activities in Afghanistan in support of the United Nations mandate and in support of the mandate which flowed from the London conference. Canada, Canadian troops, Canadian CIDA workers and Canadian diplomats are engaged in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, and in the neighbouring region, and we are not engaged in it alone. Our troops are not alone. Our diplomats are not alone. Our aid workers are not alone. Somehow, that reality has to filter down more powerfully into the discussion in the House of Commons.

Of course, all of us are responding to national mandates from national parliaments.



 (1605)

[Translation]

It is only natural to have a discussion on such an important mission in the House of Commons, but we have to remember that Canada is not alone and that Canada will not resolve the conflict in Afghanistan alone. It is not a Canadian mission. It is a UN mission and a NATO mission. It is not just a mission for our army and our military forces, but a mission for our diplomats and our CIDA workers.

We as Canadians have to better understand that we are not in this mission alone. We are in this mission with all

we as Canadians have to better understand that we are not in this mission alone. We are in this mission with all our allies. It is an effort that is both difficult and important.

[English]

Let us go back and remember, because somehow we seem to need to do this over and over again, and remind ourselves as to how we got there, what NATO and the United Nations is doing there and what we are trying and attempting to accomplish.

Let us recall that is a country that has been at the centre of a conflict that has been under way for over 30 years, initially a civil war, a conflict within Afghanistan which proved to be difficult and violent, then in 1979 an invasion from the Soviet Union in which, by the end of the invasion, over 100,000 Soviet troops were in Afghanistan, in which literally hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians were killed, in which thousands of Soviet troops themselves were killed, and which invasion was resisted. It was resisted by mujahedin fighters who were based in southern Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan and who were supported by the intelligence and military forces in Pakistan, as well as by our friends in the United States.

Ultimately, the Soviets decided to withdraw and after their withdrawal there was a continuation of a civil war. There was another civil war and conflict. Out of that conflict, came a regime known as the Taliban regime. One of the ironies of life is that there were elements in the Taliban regime that were supported by the Pakistanis, by the Americans, by ISI and by the CIA. This has been widely documented. It is not a wild assertion by anyone. It is well-known, well-documented and thoroughly researched and understood.

It is that Taliban regime that harboured al-Qaeda and allowed Osama bin Laden to operate within the country and within its jurisdiction and which provided harbour, support and allowed free rein to al-Qaeda and bin Laden to launch his attacks initially in the region and then ultimately the attacks of 9/11 on the World Trade towers.

NATO invoked the doctrine for the first time in NATO's history that said that an attack on one is an attack on all of us. This is our attack. The United Nations was engaged because of the nature of the conflict and because of the risk that was posed to the entire security of the region by the regime that was in place in Afghanistan. As a result of that, Canada, as a member of NATO, became involved. We became involved through our work at the United Nations and through our work at NATO.

A decision was made by the Canadian government to support the decision of NATO, which was sanctioned by the United Nations, that we would remove the Taliban regime, get rid of that government and launch a military attack that would allow that to take place, which is exactly what happened.

Canada participated in the initial conflict in Afghanistan. We supported the NATO operation. As a result, the Taliban regime left the major cities of Afghanistan and the rebuilding operation began. The rebuilding operation began under the aegis of the United Nations, of which Canada was a strong member and supporter, and NATO was asked and sanctioned by the United Nations to continue to provide the security services that would be necessary to rebuild Afghanistan.

At the time the rebuilding started, it is important to remember the level of destruction, the physical destruction that had taken place in Afghanistan, the level of poverty that affected the country of tens of millions of people and the extent to which we were starting from the most difficult and tragic of circumstances.

Hundreds of thousands of people had been killed, indeed, deaths in the millions, refugees in the millions and homeless in the millions. Poverty was at the very lowest levels of income and ability to survive of any country in the United Nations. It was a country that had been literally devastated by 30 years of violent conflict, to say nothing of the psychological and physical trauma; the number of people without arms, hands, legs and limbs; the number of people who were disabled; and the number of people who were absolutely devastated by the extent of this conflict.

  (1610)

The Taliban was not defeated. It left Kabul and Kandahar and the major cities of Afghanistan but it did not disappear as an organization. For reasons that historians will debate, the United States decided that it would not focus solely on the question of rebuilding Afghanistan but would extend the war on terror, as it described it, to Iraq.

In my opinion, which is an opinion I have expressed on a number of occasions, that was a mistake of historic proportion. When Richard Clarke, the security advisor to President Clinton, was called to the Senate to testify he said that this was an absolutely fatal mistake because it did two things. He said that it first let Osama Bin Laden and his cohorts off the hook and gave them the ability to regroup in the mountains of southeastern Afghanistan and northwestern Pakistan, which they have obviously done to a tremendous extent. Second, he said that it meant that the destabilization of the world was passed through to Iraq and Iraq itself became a major training ground for terrorist and guerrilla activity, making life more difficult all around.

and genuine security, making me more anxious in general.

It must be said that many mistakes have been made, both tactically and strategically, by all of us, including NATO, in how we thought we would solve this problem. The Prime Minister came into office and asked Mr. Manley and others to look at the war. They looked at the war and said that there had to be a change in strategy, that we had to get the whole of government involved and that we had to get CIDA, our defence effort and our development effort working together. We had to understand that there would not be a classic military victory. We would not have a VA day the way we have a VE day or VJ day. They said that this was not that kind of conflict and that it required a different approach altogether.

I think it is fair to say that the report that Mr. Manley chaired has had an impact today and at other times in saying that there needs to be a refocus of our efforts. We need to continue to refocus those efforts. I think it is fair to say that the report that the New Democratic Party has suggested we debate today is a report that points to that change in direction.

We are now in the middle of a national debate under way in the United States. The President of the United States has said that he wants to continue to discuss with General McChrystal and his other advisors as to how they will proceed. The Americans have increased substantially the number of troops that they have in Afghanistan, but we understand that there is now a request for even more troops with respect to the next two-year period for creating greater stability in the country.

I have been able to get to Afghanistan twice as both a private citizen and as a member of Parliament. On the basis of those trips, it is not possible for me to say that I am in any sense an expert or that I have any particular dramatic insights that are greater than those I have read.

For my colleagues in the House, I want to say that I find the membership on the special committee on Afghanistan; the foreign affairs committee work that I have done; the amount of reading I have been able to do; the travels we have been able to take to Washington; the discussions that I have had in New York, Washington and other discussions with other countries that are engaged; the very late night discussions I have had with several ambassadors in Kabul who were kind enough to come around and agree to an off-the-record conversation; the conversations I have had with our military officers and with members of their families; and the discussions I have had with our aid workers and NGOs in Afghanistan have all been fascinating, important and interesting. I think we all need to figure out how we go forward and the best way to move forward.



I am convinced that we have suffered a little from what I call mission creep in Afghanistan. Too many people started out with the rhetorical ambition that we would turn Afghanistan into a liberal democracy in relatively short order.

I am trying not to be too partisan here but part of the difficulty I had with the Bush doctrine was that it talked a lot about how we take freedom to other countries, we impose it, it is there and it will be quickly embraced, but my entire experience in life is that life does not work that way.

This is a deeply feudal, tribal society. This is a divided society, a badly damaged and traumatized society. This is a society with very high rates of illiteracy and very low levels of economic development. It is a narco-economy with over 50% of its GDP coming from the production and manufacture of highly illegal drugs. It is a society in which what we define and see as corruption is widespread.

We are having a great challenge now with respect to the election, which I asked the minister about today, and there will continue to be serious issues on this side of the House about the conduct of that election and what more needs to be done to ensure credibility for the national government in Afghanistan. There is a serious issue with respect to the credibility of that government in the eyes of a great many of its people, let alone the allies who are making such a significant contribution to the life, safety and security of Afghanistan.

This is not a crusade for anything. This is about providing security. It is about ensuring that that country and that region will not become a base from which terrorist activity can threaten the security of the world. That is what it is all about. The more we can do to advance freedom, to advance the rule of law and to advance equality, the better off we will all be. However, let us not lose our focus on what must be the central activity. The central activity is not a crusade. The central activity is security and it is a security that cannot be achieved in Afghanistan alone. It is a security that must be matched by the security we find in Pakistan.

People talk about Vietnam or other conflicts and say, "Wait a minute, let me understand. If there is a full scale retreat, there is a Taliban government in Kabul, there is greater destabilization in Pakistan and the possibility of a more radical fundamentalist government in Pakistan which has access to nuclear weapons and is an ally of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, what is the effect of that on the security of the world?"

No thoughtful person can look upon that result and say that we have peace. If we have peace, then why do we worry? Our troops are not there so no one is getting killed, so we will be at peace. However, what kind of peace will it be? If it is a peace in which the security of the rest of the world is deeply threatened, then we are simply putting our heads in the sand and pretending as if we found a solution.

I have never been one who felt that going to war or taking military action was something that could be taken on lightly. I have certainly never thought of myself as somebody who believed that democracy comes at the end of the barrel of a gun.

  (1620)

[Translation]

Nonetheless, I am certain that Canada has a vital interest in the security of the world. We must first find a way to ensure the security of the area around Afghanistan, so the people of that region and the people of the world, including Canada, are no longer subject to terrorist attacks. That is why I believe it is important for us to continue to provide the necessary focus and support to a mission that can work and that will have the chance to succeed.

[English]

In conclusion, I simply want to say that the Liberal Party and the Liberal caucus will continue to be, as much as we can be, a constructive and, I hope, effective voice in the House with respect to this mission. I do not see it as an ideological mission. I do not see it as exclusively a military mission, and we do not see it as one that is carrying on a crusade for anything. We see it as something that we hope will provide greater security for Afghanistan, greater security for the region, and yes, greater--

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The Deputy Speaker:

Questions and comments, the hon. member for Westlock—St. Paul.

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Mr. Brian Storseth (Westlock—St. Paul, CPC):

Mr. Speaker, I want to congratulate the member for his intercession. As informative as it was on the history of Afghanistan, I would like to ask him some questions on what he sees for the future of Afghanistan.

I have the privilege of representing men and women from both CFB Edmonton and 4 Wing Cold Lake who have served in Afghanistan. When I talk to these men and women, they do not obsess about the past in Afghanistan. They do not obsess about past military ventures they have been on in Afghanistan. Truly this is not Vietnam. This is not Afghanistan in the 1970s. This is Afghanistan in 2009.

These men and women tell me more often than not about the amazing difference they have made in this country from the beginning to the current date. When I talked to the development and aid workers who have been there, all they talked about was the future of Afghanistan. They are not weighed down about the past, as others are, though I do not want to be too partisan with this question.

The member talked a lot about the past and the history. I would like to know about his vision and how he sees Canada's engagement moving into the future, past 2011. Surely from the sounds of it he sees Canada being engaged in some role. I would like to know exactly what he foresees for us and what vision he has for Canada's role in Afghanistan past 2011.

  (1625)

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Hon. Bob Rae:

I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker. I have difficulty collecting my thoughts in 20 minutes, so I can assure the hon. member that I would gladly have spoken more had I been given the opportunity.

Let me just say as briefly as I can that I think there is a very important role for us, an ongoing role for us in Afghanistan. I do not believe that Canada's commitment to Afghanistan can, in any way, shape or form, end in 2011. I do not believe our commitment to the region can end in 2011. We are beginning to understand better that what happens in Pakistan, particularly in the northwest but in fact in the whole country, is every bit as important as what happens in Afghanistan. and I think Mr. Manley helped us do that.