

Speech by Hon. Deepak Obhrai, P.C., M.P.
on the Government Motion Regarding Canada's Combat
Mission Against ISIS

February 17, 2016. House of Commons, Ottawa

Hon. Deepak Obhrai (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Madam Speaker, once more it is a pleasure for me to rise in the House and participate in a debate on Canada's mission overseas. As I indicated for the Minister of Foreign Affairs, this is the seventh debate that I have taken part in since Canada became engaged or when the debates came to Parliament. I would like to remind the Liberal Party that the first time Canada entered into Afghanistan it was without a debate in the House. At that time, former prime minister Paul Martin sent Canadian Forces into Afghanistan without having a debate in the House.

Subsequently, when we came into power, we said that any time a Canadian operation took place, we would engage the House of Commons in a debate. I am glad the current government has followed our lead and has brought this motion to Parliament to be debated because many points need to be addressed.

A couple of points come to mind about this. During all those debates, when the Liberals were in the opposition, there were many areas that we agreed upon. We definitely did not ever agree with the NDP, but the NDP's approach is completely different. It is one of humanitarian assistance, but never to go to the root cause of what crisis has started and why it started. However, on many occasions, we agreed upon many points with the Liberal Party.

The point in this debate is that we definitely do not agree with the Liberal motion of withdrawing the air strikes and the air fighting capability of attacking ISIL and degrading it. Past experience has shown that air strikes is one of the most effective ways of degrading ISIL.

We sat here and listened to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of National Defence, and others give reasons for expanding capacity and sending out special forces to train the forces on the ground, as well as humanitarian assistance. Let me just remind the Liberal Party that this is what this government had originally proposed. We are already doing it in Iraq and Syria.

On many occasions, I attended conferences representing the former foreign affairs minister, talking at the conferences about engagement, both politically, in which they are heavily engaged, and diplomatically. As well, many of my colleagues went there to see what the Canadian Forces were doing.

Let me go a step further back in history. It was under the proposal by the then Liberal foreign affairs minister John Manley that there should be parliamentary oversight for our missions and he asked that we create a special committee on Afghanistan. We did, and I was a member of the committee. That committee visited Afghanistan to see Canadian engagement there. When I talked to the Afghanistan people, there was no question that they were very thankful that Canadian soldiers were there, because we had a different approach. We actually embedded into their midst and went out with them into the field. As members know, one of our soldiers

was attacked with an axe when he was totally engaged and embedded in the Afghanistan forces. It was an approach that brought us thanks from the Afghanistan people.

I was a little amazed when the defence minister said that our engagement in Afghanistan was a mess. I did not understand how it could be a mess. The fact is that the generals and everybody came before the parliamentary committee to give us an overview of what was taking place, what needed to be done, and was right to be done. When the committee, which included myself and my Liberal colleague at the time, the foreign affairs critic, Bob Rae, went to Afghanistan, we heard from soldiers and commanders. Nobody told us that the mission was a mess. It came as a big surprise to me. Of course, the Minister of National Defence was there and actually engaged. However, the minister coming to the House and saying it was a mess when nobody else told anybody that it was mess came as a big surprise.

Getting back to the question of our engagement in Syria and Iraq, I attended three conferences of foreign ministers to bring peace and stability to Iraq after the Gulf war. In all this time in the engagement, it became pretty obvious that, due to the partisan politics of former Prime Minister Maliki, everything was falling apart, which gave rise to ISIL. We all know today that the terrible root of ISIL arose due to the instability both in Iraq and Syria.

As a matter of fact, when I first went to Turkey, I visited the refugee camps. At that time, the Turkish government told us that it did not want any help. Today, with the massive refugee crisis taking place, it is seeking international assistance. I am glad that we agreed to that.

On the question of the pillars of humanitarian assistance, diplomacy, and training on the ground, yes, that is part and parcel of the whole thing. However, on taking out one of the most effective means of degrading ISIL, the air strikes, and saying that the coalition forces will carry on, I just heard the Minister of National Defence say that they are learning something.

I am a little surprised. The fact of the matter is that no other coalition force has said that it would withdraw its air strikes. It is only we in Canada. In fact, on the other hand, the British went back recently to their Parliament to start air strikes, because they felt that was most effective thing to do. Yet, here I am sitting in the House listening to the Minister of National Defence say that the Liberals are actually learning a lesson, that we are the only ones supposed to have learned this lesson on air strikes and are withdrawing from this thing. However, all the other coalition partners are going in with more strikes, including the U.S.A.

The minister said that he talked to the defence ministers when he went to Brussels, and they accepted. What do we expect them to say: no? The Liberals already made a campaign promise and openly said, before any consultation with anyone, that they were going to take the air strikes out. Therefore, this was already public knowledge. They made this commitment publicly without thinking deeper about it, and now, of course, they expect the coalition partners to say they are doing a great job and that they agree. No, they are not going to say that. They understand what an election promise is.

Nonetheless, the Liberals made this election promise, among many others, which they have broken after realizing they were not sustainable. Most important was the one on a budget deficit of \$10 billion, which is not sustainable. We saw it with the refugee crisis, that they would bring in so many people by the end of last year, but they could not do it due to logistical problems. At the end of the day, they made a campaign promise.

I know for a fact, because I was in the opposition, that one does not have all the facts. When one does get all the facts, then there is a re-evaluation, and it is very easy to re-evaluate this. This is why we are having this debate and making a very clear point of why the air strikes are very effective and why they should be resumed, which is what our amendment talks about.

I want to talk about the other issue of humanitarian assistance.

The Minister of International Development in the *Huffington Post* said very clearly that once the government gives money, it then has no control over it. However, the question was asked if the jihadists got access to it. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence, when we were debating on *CPAC*, said not to expect jihadists to wear a t-shirt that says "I'm a jihadist" on it. It is absolutely naive to talk about that. However, we are saying that if the jihadists hear of these things, then, yes, they can take advantage of them. This is one of the reasons we are opposed to UNRWA getting this money. We know from past experience that money sent to it was misused against Israel. Henceforth, we need to have oversight.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Development said yesterday, in answer to my question, that universality was very important. She was asking us a question, and said that they were just following what we were doing. I am glad she is following what we were doing, because if she really followed what we were doing, I am sure that humanitarian assistance would go to the right people.

However, it was publicly stated that we do not have any control over the assistance money, but then today in question period the Minister of Foreign Affairs said that, no, we have complete control over it and know where it is going. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of National Defence said that, yes, we have control over it.

Fine, I am happy they have control over it. I am happy they will work hard and ensure that Canadian dollars will not go to jihadists, that they will make every effort to ensure that happens

They cannot wash their hands of something that is not theirs. It is Canadian tax dollars going out there. They are duty bound to ensure that those hard-earned Canadian dollars do not go to the wrong people. That is absolutely fundamental. It is very important that the Minister of International Development does not get up and publicly say that they wash their hands of it. That is absolutely the wrong signal.

They will defend that in the House, but that is fine. Good. I am happy to hear what the Minister of Foreign Affairs said, that they will do proper diligence to ensure that money does not go to these groups. I can tell the House, from this side, we will keep an eye on that to ensure that the money for humanitarian assistance goes to the right people.

We agree that humanitarian assistance is vitally important in addressing the issue. We see the refugees coming. That is another pillar to bring peace to the region. The third is diplomacy. We all agree. As a former parliamentary secretary for foreign affairs, I was part of diplomacy working in that region.

It is a complex region. The crucial thing is that Canadians have always stood up when called to do our duty. We are again today doing the same thing. We are debating, which is the effective way to do it. We have past experience.

The Minister of National Defence says we have past experience, we are going to learn, and we are going to move forward. However, we are the only ones who somehow have found a way

to move forward. We are the only ones who seem to have found a way that intelligence capacity is something we need. He has been part and parcel of the military. Everyone knows that is a vital component. Certainly, all of a sudden that becomes more important. There are 60 coalition factions out there and all of them are working in the same capacity on this.

It comes as no surprise, as our Leader of the Opposition has stated and my colleague, the defence critic, has stated very clearly, why we cannot support the motion and why we have put forward amendments to the motion. Hopefully, we will continue doing that.

ISIL is spreading its terror throughout the world. We know from Paris, Indonesia, and Nigeria with Boko Haram fighting there. In Somali, it is Al Shabaab fighting there. In Kenya, Al Shabaab has arrived there as well. The root of terrorism is spreading. We need to fight together to fight it.

No one disputes the fact that working with those affected, the local population, is the most effective way of handling this. That is why we are with the Peshmerga in Iraq, why we went to Nigeria to help build capacity, and why we said we would support the Kenyans in building their capacity to fight terrorism. That is the most effective way.

Right now, the most effective way to stop the biggest threat to the world, the most terrible terrorist organization, is in Syria and portions of Iraq. That is where we have to go and attack. We have been doing it in an effective way. The Minister of Defence and everyone stands up and says it. We all know our pilots and our military personnel have done a marvellous job of degrading the capacity of ISIL.

That is why we are extremely surprised that the Liberal Party wants to take away an effective tool. Then, after deciding it wants to take this tool away, it makes its excuses, saying it has to put in more training officers and that we will have better intelligence capacity. It is already there. They can also do that. There is nothing stopping them increasing the training forces or the intelligence gathering.

However, why would that be at the expense of the most effective weapon we have in destroying ISIL? That is what everyone is asking. That is what Canadians are asking. In poll after poll, this is the question everyone is asking. That is the question the government will have to answer for the Canadian public.