

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee

An Inquiry

Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

October 2021

Submission by Philip Gorman

Introduction

I am a retired ship's officer and school principal. I take a keen interest in current affairs. My partner is a retired scientist and science communicator. We live on the age pension in Tasmania's Huon Valley.

As an Australian I have been greatly concerned by the very notion of a War on Terrorism and the upheavals and wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan. They have proved unmitigated human disasters which will resonate for many decades. The unnecessary toll in blood and treasure is due to repeated failures of statesmanship, intelligence and diplomacy. Australia and her allies must learn from this or repeat it.

Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

The 2001–2021 Afghan campaigns were ill-conceived and doomed to fail.

Australia's security has been further compromised by its involvement

The costs in blood and treasure were unjustified.

a. Campaign objectives

In 2001 the primary objective was to ensure that the country did not again become a safe haven for international terrorists. Bin Laden and his circle were to be killed or captured. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were to be rendered impotent and the tribes pacified.

From 2003 the objective was to provide effective permanent security across the country with new Afghan security forces.

Civil society would be bolstered to inoculate society against extremism.

a. i Limited Successes

For two decades there were no Afghan based terrorist attacks on Allied soil.

The populations of some cities and regions enjoyed some benefits from an allied protectorate during war time. We fostered developments in civil society for significant numbers of people. Although intended to provide a generational buffer against extremism such advances are being savagely curtailed by a fundamentalist theocracy. Some benefits may survive.

a. ii Profound failures

The swift overthrow of a corrupt dependent government and its agencies signalled the failure of Australia's primary objectives.

This was largely due to:

1. a fundamental misunderstanding of Afghanistan's history, culture & society;
2. an over reliance on military force;
3. a failure to curb widespread, endemic corruption, and
4. the impossibility of establishing a democratic civil society within 20 years.

By dignifying Al-Qaeda and its allies as opponents rather than criminals to be brought to justice the allies played right into Osama Bin Laden's hands. No other terrorist could ever have hoped for such worldwide success in recruiting fresh jihadi warriors. Protracted globalised conflicts were guaranteed by the rash actions of the US and its allies.

The full degree of the failure remains to be seen.

Afghanistan is now subject to different influences with seismic shifts of power and influence in Asia. It may once again become a haven for international terrorism, possibly in conjunction with a revived Al-Qaeda, Pakistan and other actors.

Many surrounding countries will have perceived interests in wresting power from 'The West'. China and Russia seek to be the main beneficiaries. This will inevitably be at the expense of Western Powers, QUAD nations and other neighbours.

a. iii The costs of Australia's engagement

It is impossible to quantify the full cost

1. 41 ADF soldiers dead, 261 wounded, over 500 suicides, plus ongoing PTSD.
2. An estimated total of ~240,000 Afghans and Pakistanis were killed.
3. Over 47,000 Afghan civilians killed with uncounted numbers wounded.
4. Unexploded ordnance continues to kill and maim.
5. Hundreds of thousands have been rendered homeless or displaced.
6. An impoverished country on the brink of economic collapse; lacking clean water, sanitation and healthcare, with half the population facing starvation due to drought.
7. Full financial costings are unavailable but incomplete records show over \$8 billion dollars spent. 2003 & 2004 figures and peripheral contributions unaccounted for.
8. The reputational costs are immense and far reaching.
9. The major ongoing cost is to global stability and our security.

[https://www.aph.gov.au/About Parliament/Parliamentary Departments/Parliamentary Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick Guides/BackgroundToAfghanistanWithdrawal](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp2122/Quick_Guides/BackgroundToAfghanistanWithdrawal)

b. Inadequate preparations for withdrawal

Poor judgement, lack of planning, poor timing, ignorance and an incompetent administration characterised the end game in Afghanistan.

b. i Closure of the embassy

The premature closure of the embassy:

1. signalled Australia's lack of confidence in the situation;
2. prevented the continuation and orderly winding up of essential diplomatic and administrative functions, including assistance to Australian citizens and others;.
3. obstructed the evacuation of Australian citizens, permanent residents and visa holders
4. curtailed Afghan employees families and others opportunities to apply for visas or seek asylum, and
5. hindered the processing of applications in an already obstructive and dysfunctional system.

b. ii Evacuation

Reluctant, incurious, incompetent, callous and tardy decisions were made. The belated decision to airlift people was restricted to Kabul Airport. Only 4,100 of over 20,00 candidates were airlifted.

Those who remain

Whether by incompetence, indifference or design many thousands were abandoned in country. They remain in grave and imminent danger of arbitrary arrest, imprisonment, torture, rape or execution.

Australia solemnly undertook to protect these people. We offered them security in exchange for their loyalty, their labour, their skills and the constant risks to their lives. The government failed to honour that commitment. To abandon our people and allies in the face of the enemy should be unthinkable. Australia has done just that.

b. iii Poor decisions, bad outcomes

Australia's national security has been further harmed by its occupation of yet another Muslim country and the failure of the enterprise.

Our international reputation is severely damaged and all our diplomacy undermined.

Australia's government is seen as treacherous and incompetent.

Our actions in this and other arenas of conflict serve to reinforce the impression of a war against Islam. It's an endless, asymmetric, unwinnable war that jihadists meet with armed retaliation and terror campaigns. Nowhere is safe.

c. How should the government respond?

All prior undertakings must be honoured as priorities, to demonstrate that we are a trustworthy nation that stands by its allies and does not betray its friends.

All visa applications by our vulnerable Afghan families should be expedited whether in country or beyond.

c. i To protect Australia's security

Australia's security is best secured by establishing trust and genuinely cooperative international relations whilst maintaining effective, agile, modern defence capabilities.

1. Due diligence should be prioritised in forming Alliances, particularly military alliances to ensure our sovereignty is not compromised.
2. All influential powers need to recognise our sovereignty.
3. All peoples should be dealt with openly, fairly, firmly, respectfully and consistently.
4. Patient statesmanship, skilful diplomacy and genuine cooperation are essential.
5. Fair and free trade plus generous aid are needed to maintain established relationships with poorer nations.
6. Our independence, long term interests and freedom of choice should never be compromised by domestic politicking or vested interests.

c. ii Mitigate the damage to Australia's reputation

Actions rather than words are required to mitigate the harm. It will take decades of good governance, statesmanship, fair dealing, aid, skilled diplomacy and just outcomes.

The Brereton Report revealed crimes that stain and undermine the standing of every member of our armed forces. Australians guilty of war crimes must be brought to justice and their victims generously compensated. The military culture that allowed such crimes must be overhauled. Exalted rank must not shield those who failed in their duty. There can be no fear or favour. Justice must be seen to be done. There is no other way to restore confidence and pride in our service people, our veterans and the ADF.

c. iii Support for Australian Defence Personnel and Veterans

The government must extend immediate, generous and sustained mental health and material support to ADF personnel and veterans both now and in the future.

c. iv Protection of our remaining citizens and vulnerable Afghan Families

All commitments and undertakings to our Afghan allies and their families must be honoured. The Australian Government should:

1. act immediately to save Afghan lives;
2. relax regulatory frameworks and procedures to expedite evacuations to safety;
3. negotiate with the Taliban to allow fleets of aircraft to evacuate our remaining Afghan families before more are abused & killed;
4. prioritise the reunification of Afghan families in Australia, and
5. grant all Afghan people residing or held in Australia permanent resettlement.

The processing of visa applications hinges on notions of eligibility. It is a grey area open to interpretation and official discretion. This may account for the dilatory rate of processing, indifference to pleas, poor communications and low rates of acceptance. Earlier vetting, satisfactory employment records, willing sponsors and having relatives in Australia often seem to be discounted. The process leaves a distinct impression of an inherent bureaucratic prejudice against Afghan applicants.

Australians understand the urgency of evacuating people before they are tortured, raped enslaved or killed. Groups are petitioning, donating, chartering aircraft, sending assistance. Our government seems to be ignoring or hindering us when it should be proactively assisting. We call on the government to assist and expedite our efforts. A Tweet from Dr. Kay Danes, OAM, makes the situation perfectly clear.

Dr. Kay Danes, OAM [@KayDanes](https://twitter.com/KayDanes)

"My team are trying to assist Afghans from Panjshir but DFAT & DoHA don't understand the need for urgency! I have charter planes to evacuate all Australian visa holders from Kabul but the AUS PM won't help! Meanwhile innocent lives are being killed."

On June 1st I started a petition <https://chnng.it/vs8pyV2d> requesting the urgent evacuation of our vulnerable Afghan employee families. This petition was originally sent to the Minister For Immigration, with updates every few weeks. It elicited no response. Nor did dozens of emails to other ministers and parliamentarians. The petition currently has 152,000 signatories.

d. What the government claims to be doing?

The sole response from the Department of Home Affairs was dated 6th September. The full text can be found below in **d. I.**

It boils down to:

- The matter has been referred to the minister.
- The Government has a longstanding policy to resettle eligible Locally Engaged Employees and their immediate families.
- The Department will continue to work with Afghan community leaders and the United Nations Commission for refugees.
- The Government is closely monitoring the situation.
- The Department works to ensure eligible Afghan citizens are processed and resettled as a priority.

The Department's wholly inadequate response conveys no sense of urgency, no pro-activity, no plans for effective action at all. It proffers no timetable, nor any hint of negotiations with the Taliban Government for the evacuation of our vulnerable people.

It is business as usual with possible future adjustments to the numbers of Afghan refugee intakes. Only if they can cross the borders to find an Australian agency are escapees able to apply for a 449 humanitarian visa. The UNHCR is left to deal with most of Australia's responsibilities.

The letter describe an impossible tangles of red tape that people are required to struggle with in order to have even the remotest chance of coming to Australia, let alone being resettled. Those employed by the ADF have to pass an extra layer of vetting prior to this.

The Department makes it clear that it has abandoned Australia's commitments to vulnerable Afghan employee families, citizens, visa holders and other families trapped in Afghanistan.

Vulnerable people have been abandoned to the mercies of an implacable enemy.

To date there is still no response to our petition, emails, or phone calls from numerous petitioners from the responsible ministers:

- The Hon Alex Hawke MP, Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs or
- The Hon Karen Andrews MP, the Minister for Home Affairs or
- The Hon. Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia, Minister for the Public Service.

All of these individuals, and many others, have been contacted, but no government parliamentarian has seen fit to respond.

d. i The sole response from The Department of Home Affairs

Dear Mr Gorman

Thank you for your correspondence to the Prime Minister, the Hon Scott Morrison MP, concerning the safety of Afghan translators and other personnel who have supported our representatives in Afghanistan. Your correspondence has been referred to the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs, the Hon Alex Hawke MP, as the matter raised falls within his portfolio responsibilities. The Minister appreciates the time you have taken to bring this matter to his attention and has asked that I reply on his behalf.

As you may be aware, the Australian Government has a longstanding policy to resettle eligible Locally Engaged Employees (LEE) and their immediate families who have worked with Australian Government agencies in Afghanistan.

For Afghan LEE to be eligible for the grant of a Refugee and Humanitarian (Class XB) visa for resettlement to Australia, they are required to apply at an Australian overseas mission and meet the following requirements:

have been employed in Afghanistan with the Australian Defence Forces, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID or the Australian Federal Police;

be certified by their employer as being at significant risk of harm as a result of their employment or support to Australia's mission; and

meet the criteria for a Refugee and Humanitarian visa (including health, character and security requirements).

The Government announced on 18 August 2021 that, owing to the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, Afghan citizens will be prioritised for processing within Australia's offshore Humanitarian Program:

an initial 3,000 humanitarian places will be allocated to Afghan nationals within Australia's 13,750 annual program, and the Government anticipates this initial allocation will increase further over the course of 2021-22; and

particular priority will be given to family members of Australian citizens, persecuted minorities, women and children, and other vulnerable groups.

The Department of Home Affairs will continue to work with Afghan community leaders in Australia to identify needs and requirements. The Department will also continue to utilise our close working relationship with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to identify those Afghans most in need. Those who have not met the threshold for Afghan LEE certification but who have a connection with Australia and extended family members of Afghan LEE settled in Australia, are prioritised for consideration under the Humanitarian Program.

The Government is monitoring the situation in Afghanistan closely. The Department is working to ensure that Afghan citizens who are eligible for Australia's protection and who meet the eligibility criteria for a Refugee and Humanitarian visa are processed and resettled as a priority.

Thank you for bringing your concerns to the Minister's attention.

Yours sincerely

Director

Humanitarian Contracts Management Section

Humanitarian and Child Wellbeing Policy & Capability Branch 06 September 2021