

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: Senate Enquiry – Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

To whom it may concern

My name is Jason Barnett, I am a concerned member of the public who has observed the farcical manner in which the government has mis-managed Australia through the longest war in its history. I have been shocked at the lack of leadership, indicated through the toxic culture in the elite military units and the lack of responsibility and accountability from political and military leaders.

As an ex-military member of no note, I have been mortified at the government's treatment of refugees from the war zones we have created, the lack of empathy for these refugees and the treatment of especially the Afghan civilians who worked with our troops. It must be remembered that one of the Victoria Cross recipients won the award for, among other things, rescuing an Afghan interpreter. That is the level of regard the troops have for those whom they serve.

My submission to the Senate Enquiry into Australia's engagement in Afghanistan is as follows

- a. Australia's twenty-year military, diplomatic and development engagement in Afghanistan, with reference to:
 - i. our success in achieving the Australian Governments' stated objectives,

To my knowledge there was no clear plan, strategy or clear objectives from the Australian government, or any other government who blindly followed the USA into Afghanistan.

Craig Whitlock, in *The Afghanistan Papers* (2021), summarised that there was no plan or strategy from the USA's perspective and that the USA government had no historical context when invading Afghanistan. The military and political leaders had been lying to the public regarding the success of the war in eliminating the Taliban and the strength of the Afghan Army.

- ii. the collapse of the Afghan Government and Afghan National Army, and the Taliban's resurgence and takeover of Kabul, following the withdrawal of coalition troops from Afghanistan,

Friday 3rd September – The Herald Sun quotes The Times saying that the *“British Foreign Office warned as early as July that Afghanistan was on the brink of collapse as the Taliban was making ‘rapid advances’ across the country.”* The risk assessment from July 22, said “cities would fall and there would be ‘mass displacement’ of people.”

Why was it a ‘surprise’ to the Australian Government and the ADF that the Afghan army would fall?

Dr Alison Broinowski, wrote for Pearls and Irritations on April 19th 2021;

“But they all knew, because the Afghanistan Papers published by the Washington Post in 2019 revealed to the world that (just as in Vietnam) the US military, along with civilian political leaders,

persistently lied to Americans about the state of the war and the prospects for success."

<https://johnmenadue.com/alison-broinowski-out-of-this-war-ready-for-the-next/>

The Afghan Army was a paper army incapable of maintaining itself once it had no support from foreign countries. This was well known in military circles, was this information shared with Australia? If this information was known in Australia, why did the government persist with sending troops to Afghanistan? Why didn't the government and the ADF plan for mass evacuations years ago when the information first came to light?

If this information was not known, what type of relationship does Australia have with one of its main allies?

iii. the costs of Australia's engagement in Afghanistan;

It has been reported that the war has cost \$10 billion, but that does not take into account the cost of those who have served, the increased risk to national security through the further destabilisation of the Afghanistan region and the civilian cost to the region.

How was it possible for Australia to send troops to a foreign theatre of war without the consent of the public? How can one person in a democracy have the power to send the nation to war without question from the voters?

How can this take into account the ongoing cost to service people, their families and communities? Australia's reputation both on a humanitarian and defence level has further suffered from the poorly managed war and treatment of refugees, can this be quantified on a monetary level?

b. the adequacy of Australia's preparation for withdrawal from Afghanistan, including:

i. closure of the embassy,

The premature closure of the embassy was an indication that the Australian government knew exactly what was going to occur with the resurgence of the Taliban and the collapse of the Afghan Army. Who was responsible for planning the evacuation? Why did the embassy close so early? Was this an intentional move to limit Afghan nationals' access to visa applications? It is assumed that the government was fully aware of the situation on the ground well before an announcement took place of the troop withdrawal and embassy closure, why wasn't there a program in place to increase capacity to process visas?

ii. the evacuation of Australian citizens, permanent residents and visa holders, and

iii. decisions relating to evacuation of at risk Afghan nationals and partners and family members of Australian citizens and permanent residents;

This submission fully supports the submission from Phil Gorman relating to the treatment of Afghan civilians and their families who served with Australian troops which is relevant to Section b of this submission.

In part it states;

"The Australian government must take immediate steps to honour all undertakings to protect the vulnerable citizens', employees', contractors' and allies' families trapped in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Show we are a trustworthy nation that does not betray its friends.

The Australian Government should act immediately to save Afghan lives; expedite all visa applications by our vulnerable Afghan families; relax regulatory frameworks and procedures to expedite evacuations to safety; negotiate with the Taliban to allow fleets of aircraft to evacuate our

remaining Afghan families before more are abused & killed; prioritise the reunification of Afghan families in Australia, and grant all Afghan people residing or held in Australia avenues to permanent resettlement.

Immediate Action is Essential. A tweet from Dr. Kay Danes, OAM @KayDanes makes the situation perfectly clear.

“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.”

The premature closure of the embassy: Signalled Australia’s lack of confidence in the situation; prevented the continuation and orderly winding up of essential diplomatic and administrative functions, including assistance to Australian citizens and others; obstructed the evacuation of Australian citizens, permanent residents and visa holders; curtailed Afghan employees families and others opportunities to apply for visas or seek asylum, and hindered the processing of applications in an already obstructive and dysfunctional system. The belated decision to mount an airlift meant only 4,100 of over 20,00 potential candidates were airlifted.

The Current Situation: September 2021

Whether through incompetence, indifference or design thousands of people remain trapped in Afghanistan in dire circumstances.

Our government guaranteed the security and safety of its Afghan employee & contractor families. It failed to honour this undertaking. To abandon vulnerable allies in the face of an implacable enemy should be unthinkable. Australia depends on the Rule of Law. Australia should adhere to International Law.

It is in the national interest to act swiftly to save lives and avoid further reputational and diplomatic damage that would severely undermine Australia’s standing.

Obstacles to action

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. Prior vetting, satisfactory employment records, willing sponsors and having relatives in Australia often seem to be discounted. This leaves a distinct impression of an inherent political or bureaucratic prejudice against Afghan applicants.”

- c. how the Australian Government should respond to recent developments in Afghanistan in order to:

- i. protect Australia's national security,

The Australian government notably decreased the national security through the invasion in the first place and then by invading Iraq. Australia decreased its national security by siding with Afghan warlords, who were no better than the Taliban or just simply Taliban sympathisers funnelling money to the Taliban from “foreign aid”. These people were generally running the opioid trade, which further destabilises the region and ends up destabilising our own communities.

The Taliban’s history of human rights abuse and corruption are unacceptable, but so is Australia’s. Australia would do well to start a dialog with the Taliban, there should be a plan to help the region stabilise, this needs to include Pakistan and Iran and acted on immediately.

- ii. prevent or mitigate damage to Australia's international reputation, if necessary,

The preservation of Australia's international reputation as what? We illegally lock people in indefinite detention for the crime of seeking asylum, mostly from countries we have been subjected to our bombs, occupation, or poor government foreign policy.

- iii. extend immediate mental health support to Australian defence force personnel and veterans while the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide remains ongoing, and

Having experience with the DVA system, I can attest to the fact that it is next to impossible to have a claim approved without it taking years. Thankfully, when I lodged my claim, I did not have any financial or mental health issues. I cannot see how this will be made possible under the current framework within which DVA and Defence operate. I have colleagues who have experienced the same issues. They make you feel like a liar, a fraud, and a malingerer, psychologically the worst of all for a defence force member.

Mental health starts with physical health, there needs to be a complete change in the way DVA deals with claims. There needs to be a review of how the defence department communicates requirements to DVA, as it is essentially the Defence Department who dictate the terms of veterans to the DVA, i.e. DVA can only do what the Defence Department says and there are inconsistencies with wording in medical records which DVA does not recognise and for which the Defence Department will not take responsibility. Their system is rigged against the veterans.

- iv. protect Australian citizens, visa holders, and Afghan nationals who supported Australian forces, where they remain in Afghanistan; and

the Australian Government has shown it does not hold any value to its citizens from its lack of interest in returning nationals home who are stuck overseas due to COVID. What hope do Afghan visa holders have for prioritisation? The government appears to have wiped its hands of the issue by effectively awarding itself a gold star for the evacuation of about 4,000 of the reported 21,000 potentially eligible people stuck in the region. If the government can spend \$10 billion on a war, it can spend some money on repatriating those who served with and in support of its defence force.

- d. any related matters.

Why, the day after Australia withdraws from Afghanistan, are we allowing the media and government to beat the war drums concerning China? Who is profiting from the new endless war paradigm we find ourselves in? Have we learned nothing? In 20 years' time will there be another enquiry wondering what lessons we need to learn following a war with China?