

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

European Committee B

EU STRATEGY IN AFGHANISTAN

*Monday 25 April 2016*

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chair:* MR ADRIAN BAILEY

† Allan, Lucy (*Telford*) (Con)  
 Cameron, Dr Lisa (*East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow*) (SNP)  
 † Cummins, Judith (*Bradford South*) (Lab)  
 † Ellwood, Mr Tobias (*Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs*)  
 † Glass, Pat (*North West Durham*) (Lab)  
 Hoey, Kate (*Vauxhall*) (Lab)  
 † Hollingbery, George (*Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury*)

† Latham, Pauline (*Mid Derbyshire*) (Con)  
 † Oswald, Kirsten (*East Renfrewshire*) (SNP)  
 † Pow, Rebecca (*Taunton Deane*) (Con)  
 † Qureshi, Yasmin (*Bolton South East*) (Lab)  
 † Tolhurst, Kelly (*Rochester and Strood*) (Con)  
 † Zahawi, Nadhim (*Stratford-on-Avon*) (Con)

Clementine Brown, Katya Cassidy, *Committee Clerks*

† **attended the Committee**

## European Committee B

Monday 25 April 2016

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY *in the Chair*]

### EU Strategy in Afghanistan

4.30 pm

**The Chair:** Before we start, I will briefly outline the procedure. A member of the European Scrutiny Committee may make a five-minute statement about that Committee's decision to refer the documents for debate—I believe that that will be Kelly Tolhurst. The Minister will then make a statement of no more than 10 minutes, and questions to the Minister will follow. The total time for that statement and the subsequent questions and answers is up to one hour. Once questions have ended, the Minister moves the motion on the Order Paper and debate takes place upon that motion. We must conclude our proceedings by 7 pm.

I call Kelly Tolhurst to make a statement on behalf of the European Scrutiny Committee.

4.31 pm

**Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con):** It might help the Committee if I explain a little of the background and why the European Scrutiny Committee recommended this joint communication and the subsequent Council decisions for debate.

The 2014 joint communication outlines the key elements of a future EU strategy, covering the political context as well as the key objectives and initiatives on which the EU will focus in support of the Government of Afghanistan. The communication focuses on four key areas: promoting peace and security, reinforcing democracy, encouraging economic and human development, and fostering the rule of law and respect for human rights. Although there was nothing controversial about the proposals in the joint communication, the previous European Scrutiny Committee, before the 2015 Dissolution, recommended it for debate because of the role that the EU would be undertaking, one way or another using EU taxpayer money, in post-2014 Afghanistan, and because of the host of uncertainties about issues essential to the strategy's successful implementation. That Committee's view was that the new Parliament would value the opportunity to debate the subject and that would give the new Government an opportunity to report on and discuss what had happened in the interim. The new European Scrutiny Committee endorsed that recommendation.

Earlier this year, in line with the strategy, the EU and Afghanistan finalised a co-operation agreement on partnership and development, which is the first contractual relationship between the EU and Afghanistan. It underpins the EU's commitment to supporting Afghanistan's development during its decade of transformation, as agreed at the 2011 Bonn conference. By strengthening political dialogue and improving co-operation in a broad range of areas, the CAPD constitutes, to quote the Minister for Europe,

“a framework for further engagement and cooperation between the EU and Afghanistan across a number of areas including political cooperation, human rights, gender equality, civil rights, peace building, counter-terrorism, development, trade, rule of law, policing, migration, education, energy and the environment.”

Nearly a year after the previous European Scrutiny Committee recommended the joint communication for debate by the European Committee, uncertainties remained about the strategy's successful implementation, particularly in relation to the security situation. In February this year, the European Scrutiny Committee further recommended that the Council's decision containing the consequential CAPD, together with the EU strategy document, should be debated as soon as possible. In so doing, the Committee's aim was to facilitate a wide-ranging debate that enables the Government to clarify and discuss how and the context in which that agreement will operate, and interested Members to explore all the implications, including for the UK's own commitments.

4.34 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank the European Scrutiny Committee for the opportunity to debate this important matter, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood for her statement.

It is important first to step back and recognise Britain's long interest in and history with the country of Afghanistan. Afghanistan gained its independence from us in 1919. As my hon. Friend said, it has endured decades of instability, and the absence of strong government led to al-Qaeda and the Taliban being able to take hold, culminating in the attacks on 9/11. Despite international efforts to assist Afghanistan, the tragic attacks earlier this month in which 64 people were killed show that there is still much work to be done. Security concerns certainly dominate, but as my hon. Friend said, the country faces other challenges, too. The World Health Organisation recently confirmed that the health status of Afghanistan is one of the worst in the world, and there are other areas of concern, from academia to economic governance and regional stability. Let us not forget that the majority of the world's heroin supply comes from opium grown in that neck of the woods. Farmers are discouraged from growing legal crops because criminal gangs and extremists are encouraging them to benefit from and participate in opium cultivation.

It is important that the international community, including the European Union, stays the course. Afghanistan will be a key focus of the NATO summit in Warsaw later this year and of the Brussels development summit in October. The combined commitment of €200 million for the next four years is the European Union's largest single bilateral commitment, which underlines the importance of that difficult part of the world. As my hon. Friend said, key areas of focus will be agriculture, health, the rule of law and, indeed, democracy.

The draft Council decisions on the signature and conclusion of the comprehensive agreement on partnership and development were submitted for scrutiny in January 2016, and the European Scrutiny Committee issued its report later that month. The Committee decided not to clear the draft Council decisions from scrutiny and requested the debate that brings us here today.

During negotiations the Government robustly defended our long-held position on agreements that cover matters of national competence, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe wrote to the European Scrutiny Committee on the matter on 10 February. I fully expect the revised Council decisions on the signature and conclusion of the agreement to list member states as parties to the agreement, reflecting that it is a mixed agreement.

As members of the Committee may know, the comprehensive agreement on partnership and development is intended to be a 10-year agreement providing a legal framework for EU relations with Afghanistan. The agreement has been under negotiation since 2011 and is now close to being finalised. The agreement will provide an overall structure for co-operation between the EU and Afghanistan and it will outline how we take forward political dialogue, development co-operation, trade and judicial co-operation. The agreement will act as a framework through which to identify priorities, to agree broad principles and objectives and to establish means of co-operation and progress. As is evident from the time it has taken to complete the negotiations, the agreement does not duck the difficult issues. It addresses our areas of concern: for example, it will commit parties to working together on human rights promotion and education and to strengthening Afghanistan's institutions.

EU negotiators are guided by a mandate agreed by all member states. Negotiators regularly report back to and take instructions from the UK and other EU member states. In that way we have ensured that many of our aims and objectives in the agreement mirror those of our bilateral relationship with Afghanistan. The Government welcome the comprehensive agreement on partnership and development as a signal of the European Union's long-term commitment to Afghanistan. We will continue to guide negotiations on the agreement to a successful conclusion that meets our objectives, but we will also shape negotiations on future EU positions, strategies and programmes that will put the agreement into effect—something that we can only do as a full and active member of the European Union.

As for the other document under discussion today, I believe it has been submitted for scrutiny, corrections have now been made and we are now in a better place to make judgments and to make the alterations that will satisfy the Committee.

**The Chair:** We now have until 5.34 pm for questions to the Minister. I remind Members to make the questions brief; you will have the opportunity to contribute to the debate that follows, so please confine yourselves to questions for now. I will allow Members to ask supplementary questions if they so wish.

**Pat Glass** (North West Durham) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the UK remains at the forefront of the EU strategy on Afghanistan, whether or not this country wants to leave the European Union? Will he say a little more about strategies for employment to prevent unemployment, alienation and possible insurgency recruitment among the 400,000 young Afghans who enter the workforce each year—particularly if the economy shrinks as the international presence and the assistance contracts reduce? Will this plan support

not just Afghanistan but the neighbouring countries that host the 600,000 displaced Afghans, who live mainly in Iran and Pakistan? What arrangements are in place to monitor the outcomes of the strategy and to audit EU aid, given that corruption is a major challenge in Afghanistan?

**Mr Ellwood:** I am pleased by the hon. Lady's tone in raising those questions. It is important that we recognise the commitment and ability of Britain to influence what the EU is doing. We must recognise that NATO and other forward-leaning organisations are able to deal with adversaries or enemies; it is in peacekeeping, rebuilding and stabilisation that the EU comes to the fore. We have expertise in this area. Our commitment not just to the NATO 2% but to the official development assistance spend of 0.7% means that we are in a very experienced place to lead in the EU, to make sure that the EU's focus is aligned with ours. We are pleased that that is also the case in regard to Afghanistan.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the challenge of employment in Afghanistan, not least because if people do not find employment, many of them can drift into extremism because they do not feel able to change their station in life. It is important that the security umbrella can continue in effect. That is a challenge, no doubt, but we are certainly seeing the ability of non-governmental organisations to operate right across Afghanistan, from Herat all the way to Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul itself, to provide education programmes that give people opportunities in life that they have not had before. GDP has increased tenfold since 2001 and the number of children in schools has increased by up to 6 million, with girls in particular going to school as well. Those are positive indications that we are able incrementally to help the country.

There are also regional opportunities for Afghanistan to participate in, such as the "One Belt, One Road" project led by China. There are huge opportunities for the region as a whole, but we must make sure that the challenges of extremism, terrorism and the Taliban are not able to knock them off course, particularly after the very difficult decade we had under the previous Government.

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Will the Minister expand on the strategy for improving the lot of women in democracy and society in general? How can we ensure that the human rights promotion and education that the Government of Afghanistan are committed to pursuing actually work? Does the Minister have a view on how the EU can best ensure that we make a real and positive contribution to security and to sustainable and stable frameworks for law and order?

**Mr Ellwood:** Again, those are very pertinent questions. On the security front, we are working with our international allies. We face huge challenges and it has been very demoralising to see the difficulties in Helmand province, which this country got to know well because we focused on it. There is the challenge of the Taliban, and often rival warlords or tribes disagree about how their country or area should advance. We remain committed to having 450 troops in Kabul, along with American units. Indeed, the international community has more than 9,000 troops assisting the Afghan security forces so they have the indigenous capability to tackle extremism.

[Mr Ellwood]

On governance, it is absolutely important to recognise the role that women should play. I stand to be corrected, but the last time that I looked at the numbers there were more women in the Afghan Parliament than in the British Parliament. That indicates the role that women can play, but aspects of Afghan society are culturally very conservative. Every effort needs to be made through the work of the EU and our bilateral initiatives to advance change at a pace that is tolerable for that country but recognises the important role that women can play in society.

**The Chair:** If no more Members wish to ask questions, we will proceed to the debate on the motion. I call the Minister to move the motion.

*Motion made, and Question proposed,*

That the Committee takes note of European Union Documents No. 9467/14, a Joint Communication: Elements for an EU Strategy in Afghanistan 2014-16, No. 15503/15 and Addendum, a Joint Proposal for a Council Decision on the signing of the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development between the EU and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and No. 15504/15 and Addendum, a Joint Proposal for a Council Decision on the conclusion of the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development between the EU and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; also notes that the strategy was adopted by the Council in June 2014, during a period of considerable uncertainty for Afghanistan; further notes that the Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development is intended as a signal of political commitment that indicates areas for future cooperation under the next EU strategy for Afghanistan beyond 2016; welcomes the UK's success in directing the EU's strategy in Afghanistan; supports the Government's view that now is an appropriate point to focus on the EU strategy's progress and delivery, as well as the EU's role in Afghanistan beyond 2016; and agrees that the UK is well placed to lead this work.—(Mr Ellwood.)

4.47 pm

**Pat Glass:** I am sure the Minister will understand why the first question I put to him was about the UK's continued commitment to Afghanistan. I have a very personal reason for that. The first thing that I did as an MP—I mean the very first thing, the day after I was elected in 2010, before I came here and signed in—was to attend the funeral of Daryn Roy, a young man from my constituency who had died in Camp Bastion in April. He was flown back and was buried the day after the election. Daryn's family was sustained at that time and has been since by his absolute belief that what he and his fellow British soldiers were doing in Afghanistan was really making a difference, particularly for women and children. I think that we all understand why we should want to see the UK at the forefront of this European strategy and why we should be absolutely committed irrespective of what happens in June this year.

It is vital that now the military intervention is over, there is a suitably funded strategy to support Afghanistan. Given our commitment, it is right that Afghanistan is the largest recipient of aid from the EU as a whole. The Minister is quite right to say that this strategy does not duck the issues. I am grateful to the European Scrutiny Committee, because had the strategy not been submitted for debate, I would probably not have looked at it in any detail. I am pleased that I did. It clearly sets out the political context in Afghanistan and the EU strategy to

help that country to become a sustainable state. It is clear that there has been real progress in Afghanistan over the past 10 years—much more so than in the neighbouring states, but the strategy clearly sets out that those gains are “mostly fragile and reversible” and describes as “acute” the challenges facing the country, including

“insurgency, corruption and the criminalisation of the state—in particular from drug money”.

It is right that the strategy focuses on peace, stability and security, on reinforcing democracy, on encouraging economic and human development and on fostering the rule of law and respect for human rights, particularly in relation to women and children. Given the fragility of this state, the challenges facing it and the fact that Afghanistan has one of the youngest populations in the world, it is vital that the EU continues to work with Afghanistan to ensure that the progress that it has made is not reversed.

4.50 pm

**Mr Ellwood:** I was not expecting to respond so soon, but I am delighted to be able to do so and to respond to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for North West Durham. She began with a reflection on her constituent Daryn Roy, who gave her a personal reason to speak today; she is to be commended for that. There will be many families who look at the commitment we made to supporting the stabilisation of a very difficult part of the world and ask themselves, “What was it all for?” It is important that we as a nation, but also as part of the European Union, continue to work to support Afghanistan as a country in its infancy, as it develops rule of law, governance and better practice and provides its own stability in a very difficult region.

I do not normally make reference to this, but hon. Members will be aware that I lost my own brother to terrorism: he was killed in the Bali bombing. The people who killed my brother were trained in Afghanistan. That is what took me to visit the country—indeed, I visited Afghanistan more than any other country while my party was in opposition. I am very familiar not only with the challenges there but with the lack of progress. I recall a visit to Camp Bastion, where they had just succeeded in taking a huge turbine up to Kajaki dam to fill in one of the slots there to generate electricity that would have changed Helmand. I was astonished to learn recently that that turbine still lies next to Kajaki dam, on the side, in its bubble wrap. That is the sort of thing we need to make sure is completed. I have said it already, but I want to make it very clear that that task, along with many other initiatives such as improvements to the Salang tunnel, needs to be moved forward. We cannot simply let go because it is not in the headlines any more; the troops are as active as they were before.

The hon. Lady is also right to recognise the scale of the youth population in Afghanistan. Many of them are looking on the internet, seeing a wider life of opportunities further afield and saying “I want some of that in Afghanistan as well.” They are the future; they are the ones we need to ensure that the country can advance. They need jobs if we are to ensure that Afghanistan becomes more stable. Economic weakness leads to insecurity and insecurity leads to economic weakness; it is important that we break that vicious cycle.

I conclude by thanking hon. Members and the Scrutiny Committee for the opportunity to discuss these important matters and Britain's—as well as the European Union's—position on and commitment to Afghanistan. We are entering a different era from the one we saw under President Karzai: the co-operation we are seeing with Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah is far better than it was in the past. The relationship with Pakistan, which was always a huge concern, is also much improved, with border security much better. Our own experience and leadership play a vital role as the European Union

participates in stabilisation and reconstruction. We lead by example: we can influence the use of resources and make sure that what the European Union does ties in to Britain's national and international interests. I thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, and I thank the European Scrutiny Committee for the opportunity to debate these important matters.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.55 pm

*Committee rose.*

