

Hilary Benn speech in Syria vote debate (London, 2015.12.02)



Thank you very much Mr Speaker. Before I respond to the debate, I would like to say this directly to the Prime Minister: although my right honourable friend the Leader of the Opposition and I will walk into different division lobbies tonight, I am proud to speak from the same Despatch Box as him. My right honourable friend is not a terrorist sympathiser. He is an honest, a principled, a decent and a good man, and I think the Prime Minister must now regret what he said yesterday and his failure to do what he should have done today which is simply to say, 'I am sorry.'

Now Mr Speaker, we have had an intense and impassioned debate – and rightly so, given the clear and present threat from Daesh, the gravity of the decision that rests upon the shoulders and the conscience of every single one of us, and the lives that we hold in our hands tonight. And whatever decision we reach, I hope we will treat one another with respect.

Now we have heard a number of outstanding speeches, and sadly time will prevent me from acknowledging them all but I would just like to single out the contributions both for and against the motion from my honourable and right honourable friends the members for Derby South [Margaret Beckett], Kingston Upon Hull West and Hessle [Alan Johnson], Normanton Pontefract and Castleford [Yvette Cooper], Barnsley Central [Dan Jarvis], Wakefield [Mary Creagh], Wolverhampton South East [Pat McFadden], Brent North [Barry Gardiner], Liverpool West Derby [Stephen Twigg], Wirral West [Margaret Greenwood], Stoke on Trent North [Ruth Smeeth], Birmingham Ladywood [Shabana Mahmood] and the honourable members for

Reigate [Crispin Blunt], South West Wiltshire [Andrew Murrison], Tonbridge and Malling [John Stanley], Chichester [Andrew Tyrie] and Wells [James Heappey].

The question which confronts us in a very very complex conflict is at its heart very simple. What should we do with others to confront this threat to our citizens, our nation, other nations and the people who suffer under the yoke, the cruel yoke, of Daesh?

Carnage in Paris brought home to us the clear and present danger we face from them. It could just as easily have been London or Glasgow or Leeds or Birmingham – and it could still be. And I believe we have a moral and a practical duty to extend the action we are already taking in Iraq to Syria. And I am also clear, and I say this to my colleagues, that the conditions set out in the emergency resolution passed at the Labour party conference in September have been met. We now have a clear and unambiguous UN Security Council resolution 2249, paragraph five of which specifically calls on member states to take all necessary measures; to redouble and co-ordinate their efforts to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by ISIL and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Iraq and Syria.

So the United Nations is asking us to do something. It is asking us to do something now. It is asking us to act in Syria as well as in Iraq. And it was a Labour government, if the honourable gentleman will bear with me, it was a Labour government that helped to found the United Nations at the end of the Second World War. And why did we do so? Because we wanted the nations of the world working together to deal with threats to international peace and security – and Daesh is unquestionably that.

So given that the United Nations has passed this resolution, given that such action would be lawful under Article 51 of the UN charter, because every state has the right to defend itself, why would we not uphold the settled will of the United Nations? Particularly when there is such support from within the region, including from Iraq.

We are part of a coalition of over 60 countries standing together shoulder to shoulder to oppose their ideology and their brutality. Now Mr Speaker, all of us understand the importance of bringing an end to the Syrian civil war, and there is now some progress on a peace plan because of the Vienna talks. They are the best hope we have of achieving a ceasefire. Now that would bring an end to Assad's bombing, leading to a transitional government and elections. And why is that vital? Both

because it will help in the defeat of Daesh, and because it would enable millions of Syrians who have been forced to flee to do what every refugee dreams of: they just want to be able to go home.

Now Mr Speaker, no one in this debate doubts the deadly serious threat we face from Daesh and what they do – although sometimes we find it hard to live with the reality. We know that in June four gay men were thrown off the fifth storey of a building in the Syrian city of Deir al-Zor. We know that in August the 82-year-old guardian of the antiquities of Palmyra, Professor Khaled al-Assad, was beheaded and his headless body was hung from a traffic light. And we know that in recent weeks there has been the discovery of mass graves in Sinjar, one said to contain the bodies of older Yazidi women murdered by Daesh because they were judged too old to be sold for sex. We know they have killed 30 British tourists in Tunisia, 224 Russian holidaymakers on a plane, 178 people in suicide bombings in Beirut , Ankara and Suruc, 130 people in Paris – including those young people in the Bataclan, whom Daesh, in trying to justify their bloody slaughter, called them apostates engaged in prostitution and vice. If it had happened here they could have been our children, and we know they are plotting more attacks.

So the question for each of us and for our national security is this: given that we know what they are doing, can we really stand aside and refuse to act fully in our self defence against those who are planning these attacks? Can we really leave to others the responsibility for defending our national security when it is our responsibility? And if we do not act, what message would that send about our solidarity with those countries that have suffered so much, including Iraq and our ally France. Now France wants us to stand with them , and President Hollande, the leader of our sister socialist party, has asked for our assistance and help. And as we are undertaking air strikes in Iraq, where Daesh's hold has been reduced, and we are already doing everything but engage in air strikes in Syria, should we not play our full part?

Now Mr Speaker, it has been argued in the debate that air strikes achieve nothing. Not so. Look at how Daesh's forward march has been halted in Iraq. The house will remember that 14 months ago people were saying, 'They are almost at the gates of Baghdad.' And that is why we voted to respond to the Iraqi government's request for help to defeat them. Look at how their military capacity and their freedom of movement has been put under pressure. Ask the Kurds about Sinjar and Kobane. Now of course air strikes alone will not defeat Daesh, but they make a difference

because they are giving them a hard time and it is making it more difficult for them to expand their territory.

Now I share the concerns that have been expressed this evening about potential civilian casualties. However unlike Daesh, none of us today act with the intent to harm civilians. Rather we act to protect civilians from Daesh, who target innocent people.

Now on the subject of ground troops to defeat Daesh, there has been much debate about the figure of 70,000 and the government must, I think, better explain that. But we know that most of them are currently engaged in fighting President Assad.

But I tell you what else we know: it's whatever the number - 70,000, 40,000, 80,000 - the current size of the opposition forces mean the longer we leave taking action, the longer Daesh will have to decrease that number. And so to suggest, Mr Speaker, that air strikes should not take place until the Syrian civil war has come to an end is, I think, to miss the urgency of the terrorist threat that Daesh poses to us and others and I think misunderstands the nature and objectives of the extension to air strikes that is being proposed.

And of course we should take action - it is not a contradiction between the two - to cut off Daesh's support in the form of money and fighters and weapons, and of course we should give humanitarian aid and of course we should offer shelter to more refugees, including in this country, and of course we should commit to play our full part in helping to rebuild Syria when the war is over.

Now I accept that there are legitimate arguments, and we've heard them in the debate, for not taking this form of action now, and it is also clear that many members have wrestled and who knows, in the time that is left may still be wrestling, with what the right thing to do is. But I say the threat is now and there are rarely if ever perfect circumstances in which to deploy military forces. Now we heard very powerful testimony from the honourable member for Eddisbury earlier when she quoted that passage, and I just want to read what Karwan Jamal Tahir, Kurdistan regional government high representative in London, said last week, and I quote: 'Last June Daesh captured one third of Iraq overnight, and a few months later attacked the Kurdistan region. Swift air strikes by Britain, America and France, and the actions of our own Peshmerga saved us. We now have a border of 650 miles with Daesh. We

have pushed them back and recently captured Sinjar. Again Western air strikes were vital. But the old border between Iraq and Syria does not exist. Daesh fighters come and go across this fictional boundary.' And that is the argument, Mr Speaker, for treating the two countries as one if we are serious about defeating Daesh.

Now Mr Speaker, I hope the House will bear with me if I direct my closing remarks to my Labour friends and colleagues on this side of the House. As a party, we have always been defined by our internationalism. We believe we have a responsibility one to another. We never have and we never should walk by on the other side of the road. And we are here faced by fascists. Not just their calculated brutality, but their belief that they are superior to every single one of us here tonight, and all of the people that we represent. They hold us in contempt. They hold our values in contempt. They hold our belief in tolerance and decency in contempt. They hold our democracy, the means by which we will make our decision tonight, in contempt. And what we know about fascists is that they need to be defeated. And it is why, as we have heard tonight, socialists and trade unionists and others joined the International Brigade in the 1930s to fight against Franco. It's why this entire House stood up against Hitler and Mussolini. It is why our party has always stood up against the denial of human rights and for justice. And my view, Mr Speaker, is that we must now confront this evil. It is now time for us to do our bit in Syria. And that is why I ask my colleagues to vote for this motion tonight.

Transcript, source:

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/hilary-benn-speech-syria-vote-69442722>

Video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yuMZ_fm0mPc

Daesh = IS

Ad Hilary Benn:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hilary_Benn

