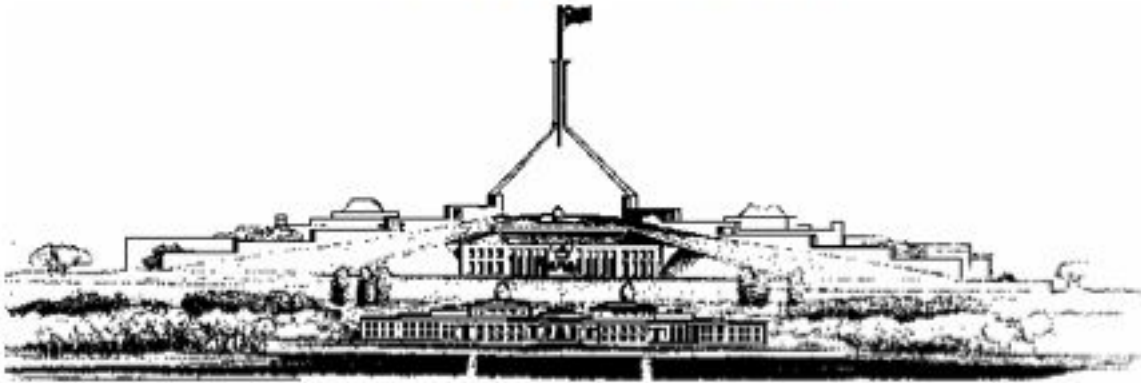




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**

**PROOF**

**MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST**

***Assyrian Community***

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 3 February 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

**Date** Wednesday, 3 February 2010  
**Page** 38  
**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Fierravanti-Wells, Sen Concetta

**Source** Senate  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Senator FIERRAVANTI-WELLS** (New South Wales) (1.38 pm)—I rise to speak on an important issue relating to the continued persecution of the Assyrian community in the Middle East and in particular Iraq. The systematic dismantling of human rights provisions against this oppressed race is a source of great concern for members of the Assyrian diaspora, including the many Australians of Assyrian heritage residing in Western Sydney.

Can I at the outset pay tribute to the many people in the Australian Assyrian community who work assiduously in raising awareness of the Assyrian persecution. These include Hermiz Shahan, the Deputy Secretary General of the Assyrian Universal Alliance, Mr David David, Mr Paul Azzo, Mr Andy Rohan, Mr Zaya Toma and other distinguished representatives of the Assyrian community, under the spiritual guidance of His Beatitude Mar Meelis Zaia.

For many in the Australian Assyrian community, there is a strong view that it remains a blemish on Western governments that more has not been done to mitigate this growing and regrettable crisis. Can I, though, at the outset acknowledge the many members of parliament across the political spectrum, in both the state and federal arenas, that have not only taken an interest in the issue but have supported the community in its efforts to raise awareness of the problems. Many have regularly attended the New Year celebrations. Indeed, last year the community celebrated the year 6759. This is testimony to the ancient civilisation of Assyria.

The Assyrians have had a continuous association in the Middle East since ancient times and are indigenous to the area known as modern-day Iraq. Over centuries the Assyrians have proven to be resilient in the face of destruction of their towns and persecution of their people. However, such challenges have ultimately decimated their present-day numbers, leading to what now constitutes minority status in the region.

Late last year, I wrote to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon. Stephen Smith; the Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Senator Chris Evans; and the Iraqi Ambassador to Australia. I sought to convey concerns that had been raised with me regarding the current plight of the Assyrians. I have received various desperate appeals from members of the Australian

Assyrian community who have documented a series of injustices.

The situation in Iraq has been precarious for innocent civilians as that country embarks on the transition to democracy following years of brutal rule by the former regime. It is clear that there are elements that seek to undermine stability to achieve stated aims. Demands on the state of Iraq are great, and frustrations with daily life can lead to internal upheaval. Many recognise the difficulty for the authorities in managing the transition and economic recovery of Iraq. It is, however, important to recognise that genocide can creep in a surreptitious manner and engulf communities if it is not resisted resolutely. This tragedy faced by the Assyrian people is amongst the many domestic challenges occupying the authorities in Iraq.

The Assyrian community provides a direct link with ancient times and traditions. Its rich culture connects the evolution of humanity and documents the natural progression of ideas and civilisation which has influenced the development of our own culture. The Assyrian identity is critical in providing the foundation of many of our own traditions and practices. We can witness the Assyrians' timeless contribution as a people to our own evolution. Let us not forget that the Assyrians speak Aramaic-Syriac, which is the language of Jesus Christ. It is a testament to their tenacity, spirituality and pride that the Assyrians continue with enthusiasm to prosecute their substantial case for support. Their perseverance cannot be taken for granted but must be acknowledged with action.

In my correspondence, I sought to highlight the plight of the Assyrians and appealed to our government to represent their concerns directly to the government of Iraq. Colleagues across the political spectrum have encouraged the restoration of their dignity and the preservation of their human rights.

If we recognise the Assyrian association with that region, then we ought to note the large and alarming exodus of such people from their ancestral homeland. It is somewhat perplexing that so many would voluntarily wish to depart this area without a rudimentary explanation. Strong reports indicate that harassment, terror and persecution provide the triggers for the displacement of the Assyrian people with great

effect. Whilst Iraq must manage its diversity from within and concurrently resist external threats, it is vitally important that fundamental rights are extended towards the Assyrian community as a genuine measure in upholding consistent democratic and secular ideals across this nation and amongst all citizens.

The Assyrians remain robust in their aims to preserve their cultural identity. The reconstruction of Iraq will take time but it is imperative that the state manages its differences with care. The rule of law provides the foundation to ensure balance across the multitude of differences that are evident amongst the diversity that exists within modern-day Iraq. Yet one can observe the tremendous obstacles that will require commitment to overcome. What further proof of intimidation and terror can be required than the fate of the Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Paulos Faraj Rahho, who was kidnapped in February 2008 and whose body was discovered a month later? If the spiritual head can be subjected to such a fate, what hope do ordinary citizens have to survive?

The Australian Assyrian community have argued that, given its participation in Iraq, Australia could facilitate a forum with international allies to again encourage debate on the Assyrian question. This could help avert a further humanitarian crisis by providing support to Assyrian refugees if the exodus continues. Obviously it is preferable for the Assyrians to remain in harmony with other communities within their own traditional homeland. However, there are reports of displaced persons who desperately deserve support. Minister Smith, in his reply to me, stated:

Iraqi refugees remain a priority group for resettlement under Australia's Humanitarian Program. In the last five years more than 10,000 humanitarian visas have been granted to Iraqi nationals. Over 3,000 Iraqis resettled in Australia in 2008-09 under the Humanitarian Program. More than half of these persons stated their religion as Christian, including Assyrian Christians.

Indeed this is an issue that I have pursued in the past and in more recent times during estimates in my capacity as shadow parliamentary secretary for immigration and citizenship.

Australia has a vibrant and active Assyrian community who have made and continue to make a tremendous contribution to our society. As a result Assyrian Australians are willing to support their compatriots in any way. One organisation which has provided a tremendous leadership role is the Assyrian Universal Alliance, which has consistently adopted a productive and dignified approach as it seeks to compassionately provide a voice for the Assyrian cause. Their perseverance in disseminating painful reports from afar across the large Assyrian diaspora is not an easy undertaking but it is an essential task.

The alliance has advocated a number of recommendations aimed primarily towards ameliorating the current situation and curtailing instances of violations and oppression. These recommendations include an acknowledgement and declaration that the Assyrians are the Indigenous and original people of Iraq and therefore entitled to an Assyrian autonomous region; that equitable and/or proportionate distribution of aid, including any reconstruction aid, be given to Assyrians through their local government representation; that assistance be provided for displaced Assyrian refugees and further demands that such programs are adequately implemented; that there be a return of all Assyrian lands and villages to date occupied by non-Assyrians; that the Iraqi constitution contain a minimum guaranteed quota for Assyrian representation at all levels of government, which, given the current official population counts, amount to 2,500,000 or approximately 10 per cent of the total population; and, that the Republic of Iraq support, establish, train and arm Assyrian security forces as part of its national security to adequately and sufficiently maintain the security of Assyrian towns and villages from further attacks and harassment.

In his reply to me, Minister Smith stated:

Australia is working with the government of Iraq to build capacity in human rights practice and has strongly supported the establishment of a national human rights commission in Iraq.

Furthermore:

The Australian government supports Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity and strongly believes that all political aspirations including those of Assyrian Christians should be pursued within Iraq's existing political framework. This is particularly important in the context of national elections scheduled for 7 March 2010.

It is in this context, I am sure, that the petition of the Assyrian Universal Alliance and that of the Australian Assyrian community for immediate action is given consideration by the Australian government and the international community. It would be profoundly liberating to the Assyrian people should such a strong symbol of support be directed in their interests.

The preservation of the Assyrian community in a region identified historically as their ancestral homeland is an important priority and the strong view of the Australian Assyrian community is that the adoption of these recommendations will provide a positive framework in restoring the liberties that we take for granted by helping to extend them to Assyrian people.

Sitting suspended from 1.49 pm to 2.00 pm