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Interview: Robert Hill

November 6, 2005

Reporter : Laurie Oakes



As government leader in the Senate, Defence Minister Robert Hill presided over the passing of an amendment to anti-terrorism laws at a special sitting this week. The amendment will allow people to be charged if they're considering carrying out a terrorist attack, but haven't decided on specific details. The change was called for by Prime Minister Howard, after he said he received specific intelligence about a potential terrorist threat. Greens Senator Bob Brown said the PM needed to concoct a situation to divert attention from unpopular IR legislation, also introduced this week. Mr Howard said the allegation was ridiculous. Senator Hill accused

Senator Brown of using the issue for his own short-term political objectives. The Defence Minister also moved a motion that was passed, that will extend an inquiry into the anti-terrorism laws until the end of the month, to give the Senate plenty of time to examine the bills. Senator Hill will discuss these and other issues with *Sunday's* political editor, Laurie Oakes ...

JANA WENDT: Some bitter accusations in the Senate this week, after John Howard alerted the nation to a terror threat.

Greens Senator Bob Brown claimed the Prime Minister had concocted a drama to divert attention from his controversial workplace changes.

The Government Leader in the Senate, Defence Minister Robert Hill didn't agree, but the Senate's inquiry into the anti-terror laws has been extended until the end of the month. And as we've seen in the news, Senator Hill has said the Government will ask for laws to call out troops on Australian streets within hours of a terrorist attack or threat.

Senator Hill is in our Adelaide Studio now to talk with *Sunday's* Political Editor Laurie Oakes. Good morning Laurie.

LAURIE OAKES: Good morning Jana. Senator Hill, welcome to the program.

SENATOR ROBERT HILL: Thank you Laurie.

LAURIE OAKES: The Prime Minister's been accused of tipping off terrorists with his announcement during the week that special laws will be rushed through to deal with a specific threat. Did he tip off terrorists? Did he do the wrong thing?

ROBERT HILL: Well he's acted in accordance with the advice of the Federal Police and ASIO, so obviously if new laws are rushed through the Parliament, as they were, we thought with good reason, then people might well wonder what information is available to the authorities. But that was clearly taken into account by the authorities in giving us their advice.

LAURIE OAKES: Now state police though are apparently complaining about that. Were they consulted?

ROBERT HILL: Well I was surprised to hear that, because we were assured by the Federal Police that they'd been working closely with state law enforcement authorities in these matters, so I certainly assume that state police were very much in the loop.

LAURIE OAKES: We had this special legislation introduced last week, plus the package the Prime Minister's negotiated with the states of draconian new anti-terror laws. Now you're planning to introduce a new anti-terror law before Christmas. Can you tell us about that?

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ROBERT HILL: Well I wouldn't put it quite in those terms. Under the Defence Act there is power to call out the Defence Force in support of the civil authority.

We've looked to use those provisions or certainly have them in place for events such as the CHOGM in Queensland, but we've found that they've been quite difficult to use in practice and really quite limited, and we've been looking at reform improvement of those laws and we obtained, we conducted an inquiry into that which reported last year.

There's been further consideration given, and I'm hopeful that the Government will adopt some changes to those laws which could be introduced into the Parliament before Christmas, considered over the Christmas break by the Parliament, and debated early in the new year. That would give us, I think, better usability of these provisions before the Commonwealth Games next year.

LAURIE OAKES: What are the changes?

ROBERT HILL: Well at the moment the provisions are for example limited to a particular terrorist site, whereas what might happen is a threat that is moving, they're very limited in terms of the maritime - a threat from the sea - very limited in terms of an air threat. They're very restrictive in terms of the use of the reserves.

There's a range of these practical aspects that now we're a few years down the track and we've witnessed terrorist attacks around the world, we have a better understanding of the type of event that could occur that's led us to believe that there needs to be some changes.

LAURIE OAKES: So we could have troops on the street with the right to search and seize, to detain people, shoot to kill, is that the idea?

ROBERT HILL: No that's not the idea. The idea is if there is an event that is beyond the capability of the civil authority, the police, to handle, and a serious terrorist incident might fall within that category, we want to be able to use the ADF flexibly and effectively to protect the lives of Australian people.

LAURIE OAKES: Now you want this in place before the Commonwealth Games. Is there a specific threat involving the Games?

ROBERT HILL: No, we don't have any specific threat regarding the Games, but the Commonwealth Government, together with the state of Victoria is putting in a major effort to ensure that there is adequate protection, and the ADF is playing a significant role in that. In fact, I've just agreed that Mr Bracks be briefed this coming week on the full aspects of the ADF's contribution.

LAURIE OAKES: If you get this legislation through Cabinet and Parliament, which I assume you will, will it require repositioning of our forces?

ROBERT HILL: Well not as such. We will have a significant force repositioned to Victoria for the Commonwealth Games, there's no secret about that. But if you're talking about ongoing repositioning, we don't have any new plans in the pipeline.

You might recall a few months ago we announced that we would position black hawk helicopters in Sydney so we have them nearer to the major capital cities on the east coast, but we don't have a follow-up proposal from that.

LAURIE OAKES: You've submitted a plan to Cabinet to expand the size of the army by I think 1400 personnel, another battalion. Will the need to use them in terrorist situations strengthen your hand in that debate?

ROBERT HILL: Well I've read that I've done that, I haven't actually said that. We do have a program to...

LAURIE OAKES: I'm hoping you'll say it now.

ROBERT HILL: ...what we call - [laughs] - well, I might disappoint you a little bit, because we already have a program to harden the network the army. We've invested a lot of money and a lot of effort into it so far, but we believe that the army will need to continue to grow a little to become heavier in terms of protection of its troops. And those sort of reforms and the money that's involved in such reforms certainly will be needed to be considered by Cabinet in the not too distant future.

LAURIE OAKES: We're continually increasing our commitments, aren't we. I gather we're about to increase our commitment in Afghanistan by 200 engineers for a

provincial reconstruction team. Has that been settled finally?

ROBERT HILL: No that's not settled. We've said in principle that we would be interested in providing a provisional reconstruction team either on our own or in conjunction with other parties. We have been talking to the Canadians, the British and the Dutch, all who will be part of the next NATO expansion into southern Afghanistan, seeking to identify a way in which we could be particularly useful. And Cabinet will consider the outcomes of those discussions over the next few weeks.

LAURIE OAKES: And you've been negotiating a status of forces agreement with the Philippines that would allow Australian troops to join there in exercises and operations against terrorists. Has that been finalised?

ROBERT HILL: It's not quite finalised. They have an agreement with the United States; we would be their second partner in effect. The Philippine constitution is very strict in requiring such an agreement before you can conduct exercises on Philippine soil, and also, there's limits in training without such an agreement. Our hope is that it will be, the detail will be settled by the end of this year and then it will need approval of the Philippine Senate, which might be quite challenging.

But certainly we think it is in our interest to help the Philippines more effectively meet the threat of terrorism in Mindanao and other parts of southern Philippines because we believe that that is not only a threat to them but also a threat to us.

LAURIE OAKES: We're increasing our Afghanistan commitment almost certainly then, we're likely to send troops to the Philippines, we've got a lot of people in Iraq. Can we talk about Iraq - is there any sign yet of when Australians can withdraw from Iraq?

ROBERT HILL: Can I just clarify it? I'm not suggesting military operations in the Philippines, I'm certainly suggesting we should be able to give them more support in training.

In relation to Iraq, the task is ongoing. The political process is obviously making significant, is progressing at significant pace with the successful adoption of the constitution, and we have the major election on the 15th of December. But the security situation is still very difficult, particularly in the central region, and I think they'll need support of the international community for some time to come.

But that'll be considered by the United Nations later this year, because there'll need to be a new resolution of the Security Council, and obviously after the December election and the new government being put in place in Iraq they will have their own view on how long they want the multinational force to stay.

But we believe there is still important work to be done there, and we're still - and because of that - and again in terms of protecting our own interests from terrorist threats we will be staying engaged.

LAURIE OAKES: The annual AUSMIN meeting, the meeting of American and Australian Defence and Foreign Ministers, is happening in Australia later this month. Will a timeline for withdrawal from Iraq be discussed at that meeting?

ROBERT HILL: We'll certainly discuss Iraq and I'm looking forward to that meeting, because the US is leading the coalition force and to have another face to face discussion with my counterpart on US plans and proposals would be useful.

But as I read it, the US position is really the same as ours, that Iraq needs their support at the moment. They're in the process of establishing this new democracy, they've made considerable progress, but it's up against a really vicious insurgency, and that insurgency is yet to be defeated.

LAURIE OAKES: Will the Americans be sending their heavyweights? Are Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice attending the meeting?

ROBERT HILL: Well I wouldn't speak on the Foreign Affairs Department side, but I'm expecting Mr. Rumsfeld. That's, of course, subject to the exigencies of the moment, but certainly I'm hoping that he will visit Australia before Christmas as part of those meetings, and I think we'll have very useful discussions.

LAURIE OAKES: I guess the American President's in so much trouble nothing is certain with that administration.

ROBERT HILL: Well I don't think it's an issue of domestic politics, it's just that - if you think that we've got a lot on our plate, I can tell you that Mr. Rumsfeld's got a lot more on his.

LAURIE OAKES: Well you have got a lot on your plate, which is why people are wondering whether you're going to be staying around to deal with it. Can you guarantee that you will be staying on as Defence Minister?

ROBERT HILL: Well I'm very happy in the job. I've now been doing it what, for nearly four years. I'd like to think I'm doing it well. And beyond that, it's a decision for the Prime Minister.

LAURIE OAKES: And if the Prime Minister wants you to go to New York to be the Ambassador to the UN, will you accept?

ROBERT HILL: [Laughs] You've been reading the same newspaper as me. I'm very happy with what I, I'm very happy with what I've got, I'm enjoying the Senate job with my majority of one, which is an interesting new challenge. We've got a great deal of work in the Senate before now and Christmas, and that's where my focus of attention is.

LAURIE OAKES: Senator Hill, we thank you.

ROBERT HILL: Thanks Laurie.

LAURIE OAKES: Back to you Jana.

JANA WENDT: Senator Robert Hill speaking there with Laurie Oakes.

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