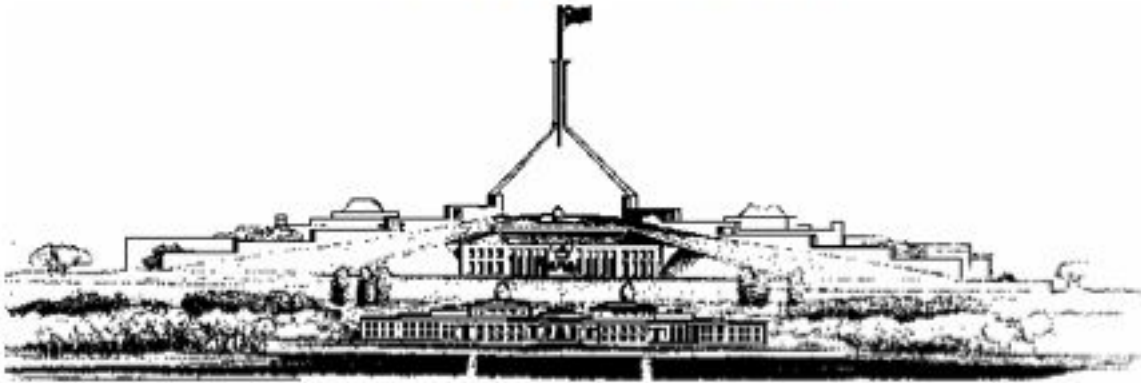




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

BILLS

**Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment
(Veteran-centric Reforms No. 2) Bill 2018**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 31 May 2018

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 31 May 2018
Page 21
Questioner
Speaker O'Brien, Ted, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr TED O'BRIEN (Fairfax) (11:33): The debt Australia owes our military past, present and future is immeasurable. It is a debt we owe for our basic freedoms and our way of life. As capable and increasingly well-equipped as our Defence Force personnel most certainly are—drawn from a country of just 25 million people—the ADF cannot hope to comprehensively protect our freedoms or defend our democracy and interests all by themselves. Our commitment to play a role in foreign conflicts over the 117 year since Federation has generally been on the basis of carrying as large a share of those conflicts as we have been able to bear and often in alliance and concert with larger like-minded democracies. Our contribution, the contribution of our military, in that context, by any comparison, has been quite extraordinary. In World War I, from a population of just under five million, fewer people than now live in Sydney, 416,809— (*Quorum formed*) Can I say how unfortunate it is that the Labor Party has decided to interrupt a discussion where in fact we have a unity ticket, talking about the importance of those who have served this country. Indeed, the Department of Veterans' Affairs has around 300,000 former soldiers, sailors and Air Force personnel on its books. Over 1,700 of these former servicemen and servicewomen live in my electorate of Fairfax on the Sunshine Coast, and I can't tell you how proud I am to represent them here in this House.

The numbers alone of those who have served tell us that there are few families in this country that do not have some form of connection with the enormity of the sacrifice of those who have served and especially those who saw conflict. Every serviceman or servicewoman from the Sudan all the way through has left family and friends at home. They've had parents or a partner, possibly brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins, and, of course, many of these people who have served had wives, or husbands, and children when they left for foreign lands with their mates to put themselves in harm's way and confront the reality of war. Millions of today's Australians, therefore, necessarily have a deep, close, organic connection with someone who committed themselves to military service on our behalf. Even for those who don't have such stark links, there is a strong recognition of service which simply underscores and highlights the obligation we have, as a community as well as a government, to all those who have served and will serve in the future.

The bill now before the House, the Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (Veteran-centric Reforms No. 2) Bill 2018, represents the latest refinement in what is, and no doubt will continue to be, an ongoing and essentially bipartisan effort to ensure that our federal government keeps up with its responsibilities and also with community expectations. The first reform contained in this bill enables an injured veteran who is studying full-time as part of an approved return-to-work rehabilitation program to be paid incapacity payments at 100 per cent of their normal weekly earnings over and above the current limit of 45 weeks. Under the existing scheme, these payments come back to 75 per cent of earnings after 45 weeks. This reform reflects a commitment to giving our veterans and their families more help in achieving a brighter future through study and the acquisition of new or improved skills.

The second element of this bill is a veteran suicide prevention pilot, a pilot that accounts for evidence that suicides are considerably more common among military service veterans than is the case for the general public, especially for younger veterans—those in the 18-to-24 age cohort—where suicides are virtually double the general rate. There will be stronger emphasis on a coordinated approach to helping veterans at risk of suicide, with an emphasis on effective support in areas of primary health, financial stress, housing and employment issues, which are key factors in elevating that risk.

The third change to current provisions extends the amount of time that a partner of a deceased veteran has in which to decide whether to receive the compensation payout to them as a weekly payment or as a lump sum. Currently set at six months, that period will be extended to two years, reflecting the fact that, for many partners, traumatised by their loss, six months to make that decision can be too short a time frame. They need more time, and a full two years provides just that.

The fourth element of this bill extends access to support for post-secondary education for Vietnam vets via the Long Tan Bursary, from the children of veterans with operational service in Vietnam to, now, their grandchildren as well. This is also a very welcome move.

The fifth reform in this bill is a very informative one, in that it illustrates very clearly that serving in what we may consider relatively peaceful times can be as hazardous as in those times which have confronted past generations during other conflicts. From the 1970s and at least until 1992, Australian submariners conducted, in some secrecy, intelligence-gathering patrols to our north and west on a regular basis, in places and in circumstances that meant that, if they were identified, there was a risk of confrontation. Submariners who served on those patrols are now recognised by this bill as having undertaken operational service. This recognition will expand their access to veteran entitlements and at levels above what has been available to date. The sixth aspect of this bill simplifies claims for compensation, allowing claims by veterans to be made orally as well as in writing.

These are welcome and worthy reforms to the treatment of our veterans, whether they are veterans of conflict or veterans of peacetime service. The debt we owe these great and unassuming Australians, both of this generation and of generations past, is beyond measure. In our folklore, in relation to military service, we have tended to isolate iconic moments for special recognition: Gallipoli, the Somme, Kokoda, Tobruk, Long Tan. They all involved unspeakable suffering, with displays of enormous courage and self-sacrifice. Such commitment to duty, service and country holds them worthy of the awe we have attributed to them as definitive campaigns.

However, we also must comprehensively recognise what our wider family of service personal means to us and acknowledge their roles, many now largely forgotten by the well-thumbed pages of history, in guarding and defending our nation. All those who offer themselves for service in our military, whether the past, the present or the future, are automatically worthy of our admiration and ongoing life-time support, because, as I have sought to highlight, their decisions to serve are taken in the full knowledge that they could be called upon at any time in our uncertain world to endure the crucible of war and risk their very lives for us, for our values, for our freedoms and for our way of life. They deserve and they have earned all the support and understanding that we can give them. For that reason, I'm happy to commend this bill to the House.