HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS AMENDMENT (DIRECT DEDUCTIONS AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2004

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 21 June 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (7.37 pm)—The Veterans’ Entitlements Amendment (Direct Deductions and Other Measures) Bill 2004 proposed here is good legislation and we praise the government for proceeding with it. These are small things but they are things that needed to be done and I am well aware, as are many other members of parliament, of the necessity of carrying out a number of these actions. Having said that, when we introduce legislation in this House, whilst the legislation says that we will do these things, by implication there are also things that have not been done.

I attended a major address by the outgoing Dean of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Queensland. He said that there were three great shames of this country: the first was the way we treated the first Australians—and some might disagree with that, but that is what he said—the second was the way that we have treated the dairy farmers of this country and the third was the way that we treated the men who returned from Vietnam. The Boyer lectures by Tom Fitzgerald some years ago were, I thought, the best things I had ever heard on radio. He was a fighter pilot in Britain. He remembered with great bitterness that they were brought home in the dead of night and the next day their vehicles had graffiti painted all over them. The people of Australia were very hostile towards these men. They were ordered—they had no option—to go and fight in Great Britain. Australians believed that they should have been here fighting for Australia, but, of course, in wartime, if you do not do as you are told, you get shot—it is called treason. There is very swift action taken. So those men suffered, but there was a very small number of them.

In the case of the Vietnam vets, they came home to a most unfortunate situation, to say the least. I agree with everything that the previous speaker, the member for Moncrieff, said, but words are cheap. If you want to express your appreciation to somebody then, ever since the Phoenicians invented money, money has been one way of doing it. The other way of doing it is with medals. I have been asked to put questions to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and she will be receiving them by way of questions on notice. I think it is right and proper that they should be aired in this place at this time. They are as follows. Is the minister aware that there are thousands of Defence Force personnel—and this is not in this bill—who have served since 1946 without any recognition of their service by way of the award of a medal? Is the minister aware that these personnel include regular officers and soldiers who, between 1946 and 1972—a 26-year period—had no medal recognition at all? These include many female personnel who were compelled to leave the service in earlier days upon marriage and therefore did not complete the 15-year service period required for any such awards as then existed, personnel retrenched through no fault of their own after periods of service often exceeding 10 years but not 15 years and personnel who were injured in non-operational military service and thus did not qualify for any medal recognition.

Is the minister aware that representations have been made, supported by approximately 60 service and ex-service organisations, that a medal should be issued to personnel such as the above to cover those persons falling through the cracks in the present award system, so that such persons are recognised and can participate with dignity and recognition in such patriotic events as Anzac Day? Finally, does the minister agree that persons such as the above merit medal recognition and this recognition should be both prospective and retrospective?

As to the civil service medals—and my maternal grandfather was one of these cases; he wanted to join up, but he was told that, because he was a builder and carpenter, he had to go into the civil service corps—all of us that have given out those medals have seen the extremely great pride with which they are accepted. In many cases now, sadly, they are accepted by the descendants of those people. In my grandfather's case, it was my auntie as he had already died. It seems to me that there is little purpose in giving out medals after a person has gone. So we plead with the minister to look at and seriously consider this.

The opposition spokesman said that there is a non-reactiveness from this department. Whilst he may have addressed the remarks to the minister, I have to say in all seriousness and sincerity that it is a charge, allegation and criticism which I have heard constantly and it would be improper of me not to pass it on in this place. These requests are not listened to. Even the decision to give the service medal and certain other actions that government has taken were only after years and years of anger because of representations that were ignored in this place.
Finally—in this bill—in the First World War the soldiers came home and were provided with free education and soldier settler blocks. In the Second World War they came home and were provided with free education and soldier settler blocks. The men that came home from Vietnam were provided with nothing. A very large segment of this community treated them with great disrespect and in an extremely shabby way.

When the Dean of the Faculty of Economics talked about those three great shames, I added the part we played in the Boer War, where 28,000 women and children perished in the British concentration camps, and the fact that we did not take any of the Jewish refugees trying to flee from Mr Hitler in the Second World War. That makes up five great shames of this country—particularly the Jewish one, where some six million of these people perished because they could not get out of the country as no other country would take them. If they had gone to Israel, who could blame them?

The reason I make that point is that there is something bad and morally wrong that we need to fix up. We cannot have a country with a great spiritual patriotism if we do not address these problems. If we go out and march on Anzac Day and then treat these men in the most shabby of manners and provide them with absolutely nothing for what they were forced to do in the Vietnam War, whether they liked it or not, then we are deserving of the greatest criticism. I do not think that this situation should continue.

Let me now be very specific about what needs to be done and what is not being addressed in this bill. In North Queensland there is vacant land at Kalpowar Station and a number of servicemen have simply moved into occupation. I give fair warning in this place: Les Hiddins and the boys have brought back soil that is stained with the blood of our soldiers and taken it up and placed it at Kalpowar Station. People have lost family—and I most certainly am one of them. I have lost family from amongst my forebears at Suvla Bay. Some of their blood was spilled there when they went there and is still there today. This will be a sacred place for Australia. If anyone dares touch it, then they will understand the wrath of patriotism that will flush out in this country. So we give fair warning on this issue. If these people were not given free education when they came home, if they were not given soldier settler blocks, if they were treated as substandard soldiers when they returned home then who could blame them for taking the actions that they have taken at Kalpowar Station?

The onus lies upon the government, the minister and the department to act in requested areas with respect to these medals and the station property in North Queensland. Many other people in this country—national parks and our first Australians, who we are very proud of, of course—have received huge amounts of land, but these people have received no land at all. They have claimed little bit of Australia for themselves—good on them. We plead with the government to answer the questions we have asked and to act on these other matters discussed here this evening.