



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS**

**Veterans**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 16 August 2017**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Brodtmann, Gai, MP

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**Ms BRODTMANN** (Canberra) (11:22): There is no higher calling than military service, no higher calling than being prepared to defend your nation and no higher calling than being prepared to put your life on the line for your country, for your values, for your beliefs and for your democracy. That is what members of the Australian Defence Force do each and every day, and that is what our veterans have done. That's why we need to provide them with respect, we need to honour them and we need to support them not just when they're in uniform but also when they're transitioning out of uniform and once they have left the ADF.

Since being Member for Canberra, I have met many broken ADF men and women. They have served their nation in Iraq, they have served their nation in Afghanistan, they have served their nation in Vietnam, and they are broken; they're lost in a civilian world. They see their military service as a calling that defined their very being, and they are lost out in a civilian world. They took their calling very seriously. They felt deeply honoured to serve their nation through the Australian Defence Force, and they feel deeply let down. They feel that the ADF, Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs let them down when they weren't able to continue to serve their nation. It is a very confronting issue for them. Their aspiration, usually since they were small children, was to serve their nation through the Navy, Army or Air Force. That's all they wanted to do. They went through cadets and then they went on to ADFA, or to training somewhere, and they went throughout the nation in their particular service. Their calling, from when they were small children, was to serve their nation in the Navy, the Army or the Air Force, with many of them following traditions—it was an intergenerational calling.

You can imagine how betrayed and bewildered they are when they unfortunately incur some injury during their service and they are basically commissioned out of service. It is a huge challenge for our veterans to be able to survive and thrive in civilian life. We've heard so many stories over the course of this debate about the physical impacts on them. Many of them have been broken physically during the course of their experience and service to the nation, but many of them have also been broken mentally. That's why it's very important that we, as a nation, take their challenges seriously and take their issues seriously. My late father-in-law was a Vietnam vet and I'm married to an Army brat. My late mother-in-law said that she got a very different man back from the Vietnam War.

The impact of the Vietnam War has only been realised in the last 10 years. We should be learning from the lessons of forgetting about the impact of war and what that did to Vietnam vets. We should be learning from their treatment and ensuring that we do not repeat what happened to those Vietnam vets. There are people who have served not just in Afghanistan and Iraq but also on peacekeeping missions in the Pacific, Africa and elsewhere. We must ensure that lessons are learnt from the treatment of Vietnam vets so we do not make the same mistakes again.

All of us in this chamber would have had experiences and conversations with veterans, both men and women, who unfortunately have experienced a repeat of the experiences our Vietnam vets went through. I know of veterans who have been fighting for the right to study. This is just as part of their transitioning-out process. Vietnam veterans who have significant mental health and physical health issues are fighting for the right to have a hearing aid or are fighting for the right to have decent rehabilitation treatment. We cannot do this to our veterans.

We are talking about significant numbers. Currently, the Department of Veterans' Affairs supports around 291,000 Australians, and just over half of those people are veterans or currently serving members of the ADF. Around 48 per cent of them are women. Around 82,000 are widows or widowers and around 2½ thousand are children of veterans. On average, our ADF personnel will serve for around 8½ years, and each year around 5,200 will leave. That's 5,200 new veterans every year who require respect, who require the right to be honoured for their service and who require adequate support to transition from life in the defence force to civilian life. It's vitally important.

Numerous studies have been done on this issue. In 2013, the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade looked into the care of Australian Defence Force personnel who were injured on operations. It was noted the rehabilitation programs and the return-to-work programs could be improved. A particularly major point of that review was the lack of seamlessness between Defence and DVA. The review was conducted in 2012-13. We are still dogged with the same problem of lack of seamlessness. Essentially, as vets move from being serving members to veterans, they are lost in translation, in terms of the move to new systems. That has to end, particularly in 2017 with the range of systems that we have in place now. It has to stop. We have to provide greater transition support to these veterans and greater support through the systems—acknowledging that they exist and that they're being moved from one part of Defence to another part of Defence.

Yesterday, the Senate inquiry's report into suicide by veterans and ex-service personnel was released. The inquiry received 443 submissions. Many of those submissions expressed their frustration at a number of processes, which I have just highlighted, including the transition from ADF to civilian life, and how this can be compacted with complicated processes within the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Labor will work through the evidence provided to the Senate inquiry, carefully consider the recommendations and continue to work with ex-service communities, the government and the parliament to address the critical policy gaps when it comes to providing better support for our veterans and our ex-service personnel.

In speaking about our veterans, I do not want to overlook the significant contribution of families of veterans—like my late mother-in-law and like my husband's family—and their support not just during their life in the ADF but also, importantly, when they're making the transition out of the ADF into civilian life. It can be very, very tough, particularly if your husband, wife or partner has come back from Iraq or Afghanistan a different person—as was the case for my late father-in-law when he came back from Vietnam. It can be very, very challenging for a relationship, particularly for partners and children. So we need to pay as much attention to the families as we do to the veteran, because it's the families that are left behind when the person has served. They've done the hard yards.

There are a range of challenges in terms of supporting families in a modern Australia, in 2017, and ensuring that those who are working are not having their careers in any way ruined, because their partner is serving in the Australian Defence Force—and we see that time and time again. We need to have a very close look at the support that we're providing to families—not just the families of current ADF members but also of veterans. That's why I welcome the shadow minister for veterans' affairs proposal, Labor's proposal, to develop a family engagement and support strategy for the families of our defence personnel and veterans.

As I said, these families—these men, women and children—are the unsung heroes of our defence forces. A number of reviews have highlighted that there is currently a lack of emphasis on the critical role that they play in the life of current and serving members. Developing a family strategy also acknowledges the importance of families in the rehabilitation of ADF members and veterans. We owe it to our ADF members and to our veterans to acknowledge, honour and respect their service, and we do that by providing them with the appropriate support.