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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**BILLS**

**Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment  
(Mental Health and Other Measures) Bill 2014**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 29 May 2014**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** McCormack, Michael, MP

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**Mr McCORMACK** (Riverina—Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Finance) (11:05): I rise to speak on the Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (Mental Health and Other Measures) Bill 2014 and, in doing so, acknowledge the important role that the military plays in my Riverina electorate. Indeed, my home town of Wagga Wagga is home to three military bases: the Army Recruit Training Battalion at Kapooka, the Royal Australian Air Force Base and, indeed a Navy base. Even though we are a long, long way from sea water, we have an important Navy training base which does a lot of good work with HMAS *Albatross* at Nowra and works in conjunction with the RAAF base at Forest Hill.

I speak to a number of veterans and their families about post-traumatic stress disorder and about the stresses and strains that Army, Air Force and Navy life place upon them and their families. When they are serving, as well as when they finish their service, many do feel the strain of that service. Certainly these people place their lives on the line on behalf of our nation each and every day when they are in uniform. We as a parliament send those men and women to conflict, to places where many of us would not like to go—certainly places where many of us would not like to visit, let alone take up active combat participation in those places. It is incumbent upon us as a parliament—as the people who send them to war and into combat zones—to look after them during their time of service and after their service has finished. The Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (Mental Health and Other Measures) Bill 2014 does this in part. As well, the coalition's other measure regarding proper and fair indexation has also gone to helping veterans who have served and are serving our country so well.

This legislation will improve and enhance mental health services for veterans and their families by enlarging eligibility for non-liability health care for veterans and ex-service people as well as providing access to the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service, the VVCS. There are a series of other minor amendments to legislation affecting veterans and their families. The bill implements recommendations from the review of military compensation arrangements and other measures announced in the 2013-14 budget. These measures are noncontroversial and they are very beneficial in nature.

The government has a four-pillar approach to veterans affairs. Firstly, recognising the unique nature of military service; secondly, maintaining a standalone Department of Veterans' Affairs; thirdly, tackling mental health challenges facing veterans and their families; and, finally, providing adequate advocacy and welfare support for veterans and their families. This legislation assists the coalition to deliver its agenda for veterans and their families.

I might digress a little to talk about Kapooka, which I mentioned before. On 21 May 1945—just months from the end of World War II—a tragic event occurred at the engineers training base at Kapooka. While being shown demolition and explosive procedures, an enormous explosion occurred in a dugout killing 26 personnel. The *Daily Advertiser*—the local newspaper—described the funerals which followed as 'Wagga's saddest day'—and indeed it was. The Kapooka camp had been established by the Australian government as the main Royal Australian Engineers training facility in eastern Australia just three years earlier. On 21 May 1945, two instructors were taking 26 young conscript sappers through training in the use of explosives. They were located in a dugout, where men usually waited while an explosion occurred above ground level. This and two other underground rooms were located a large distance away from the Kapooka buildings—towards today's suburb of San Isidore. An enormous explosion occurred in the dugout at about 2.45 pm and 24 sappers died plus the two instructors. Two men who were just outside survived. The sound of the explosion could be heard in the city of Wagga Wagga, more than 10 kilometres away.

If that event happened today you could just imagine what would transpire. It would be of enormous consequence to this parliament, to our nation and to the military. This event occurred during a time of conflict, the Second World War and, sadly, it did not receive the attention, the respect and the dignity that it should have. It was only in recent years that a formal memorial has been placed near the site where this occurred. The actual site is now in private farming hands, but the memorial is just a stone's throw from the actual site. Each and every year now

on 21 May Kapooka and the community of Wagga Wagga come together to acknowledge and to commemorate that dreadful event.

I say this in the context of this debate because the stress, strain and mental anguish that surely followed that awful occurrence back in 1945—when times were, admittedly, a little different—would be considered far differently if it happened today. The families back in the 1940s and even the decades after, sadly, did not receive the due respect, treatment and provisions that the current government would provide. Indeed, all members across the House would acknowledge that such an event deserves to have the respect and certainly the financial provisions for those affected families. But, of course, life was much different back in those days.

We talk about World War I and we talk about World War II and the tens of thousands of Australians—indeed, 102,000 Australians—who have died in conflict. But in World War I and World War II many of the people who came back were expected to get on with their life as per normal. They were expected to just fit back into society, fit back into their families and fit back into the social fabric of society. We now know that they must have suffered the same sorts of stresses and strains that our current serving men and women feel. But, as I say, life is very different these days and emotions are different.

We as a government and we as a parliament—because I know this has cross House support—should treat our former military personnel with utmost respect and provide the financial assistance, the counselling and the care that they deserve. They do, as I said, place their lives on the line each and every day. I stand here giving this speech with the Parliamentary Secretary for to the Minister for Defence alongside me. I know the efforts that he has gone to in his role as the parliamentary secretary for defence to ensure that fairness is provided to our veterans. I know the role he is playing to ensure that our service people are well catered for, not only whilst they are still wearing the uniform but also when their retirement has come and they have packed the uniform away and their career is done and dusted and they are getting on with their life. He has spoken to many, many families and many, many people to see what he can do in his capacity as parliamentary secretary to help them to adjust to normal civilian life.

The Abbott coalition government has delivered on its 2013 election promise—indeed, it was also our election promise in 2010—to the 57,000 military superannuants and their families. This is a responsibility that I know the parliamentary secretary takes very seriously. It is certainly something that the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Senator the Hon. Michael Ronaldson, and Assistant Minister for Defence, the Hon. Stuart Robert, the member for Fadden, also take very seriously. On 27 March this year they welcomed the passage of the Defence Force Retirement Benefits Legislation Amendment (Fair Indexation) Bill 2014 through the Senate, giving effect to the coalition's commitment to give veterans a fair go—which is also what this legislation is doing. That day, 27 March, was a day of fairness. It showed, it exemplified and it underlined that the government had fulfilled its pledge to give veterans the compensation and the indexation that they deserved. 'We made a promise and we have kept it to the letter,' Senator Ronaldson said, in announcing the fact that it had gone through the Senate and had become legislation.

From 1 July 2015 Defence Force Retirement Benefits Scheme—DFRB—and Defence Force Retirement and Death Benefits Scheme—DFRDB—military superannuants aged 55 and over will have their pensions indexed in the same way as age and service pensions. The fair indexation provisions will also extend to reversionary widow pensioners aged 55 years and over. This is very important. It has been a long-fought campaign for justice, for equity and for fairness. Bert Hoebee, a former deputy commandant at Kapooka, has made innumerable representations to me, via both email and telephone and certainly in person, to ensure that their pensions were fairly indexed. He would argue now that it still does not go far enough to providing what they require and what they need, but it is a big step in the right direction. It is certainly something that we have delivered upon as a coalition government and certainly something that the previous government had not delivered upon, despite their promises.

At the time of this superannuation indexation going through the Senate, the Assistant Minister for Defence, the member for Fadden, said that from 1 July this year military superannuants and their families would benefit from the change in indexation arrangements—and I say not before time. The Assistant Minister for Defence further said:

The passing of this legislation today confirms this Government's recognition of the unique nature of military service and the sacrifices military personnel and their families make on behalf of all Australians.

I am sure the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence, who is at the table, would certainly agree.

This legislation is an investment in fairness. It will ensure the purchasing power of DFRB and DFRDB military superannuation pensions is maintained, which is something that Bert Hoebee, retired now from the Army but certainly not retired from active service of sorts, was stressing to me all along. Through the passing of this legislation, veterans and their families have finally been delivered the fair go that they deserve and that this parliament should have provided many, many years ago.

The Veterans Affairs Legislation Amendment (Mental Health and Other Measures) Bill expands eligibility for non-liability health care to current and former members of the Australian Defence Force with three years continuous full-time peacetime service from 7 April 1994. It addresses an anomaly in eligibility and will provide early intervention treatment. The high rates of comorbidity between existing mental health conditions and alcohol and substance use disorders are a driver for extending treatment coverage of these conditions. We heard the member for Ryan a little earlier talk about this very fact.

Schedule 2 of the bill increases access to counselling from the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service. The previous budget allocated \$6.4 million to expand services to include members of the Australian Defence Force with service in border protection roles as well as submarine and disaster zone personnel, along with their families. Newly eligible members and former members will be advised of the changes once they are passed by parliament, and hopefully that will be very soon. These people, who put their lives on the line, who put their lives on hold and their families on hold for the time that they provide such sacrifice and dedication on behalf of our nation, deserve to know very quickly that this legislation is going through.

Schedule 3 takes away the requirement for Commonwealth seniors health card holders to reapply for their card if they travel overseas for more than six weeks. Currently when a CSHC holder travels overseas for more than that period their associated seniors supplement is cancelled. They must reclaim it, as well as their CSHC, upon their return to regain the benefit that is provided. The amendments will suspend payment for a six-week period and reinstate it upon the recipient's return to Australia, and that is necessary.

Schedule 4 makes a series of changes to the Veterans' Review Board. These measures introduce alternative dispute resolution to help define the issues in dispute and identify any additional evidence required for the appeal. That too is important. The amendments also intend to give the Veterans' Review Board greater case management powers to resolve matters before it more efficiently, and that is necessary.

Schedule 6 aligns the wholly dependent status of an eligible young person not living with the member but for whom the member is liable to pay child support.

Finally, schedule 7 will again allow the Chief Executive Officer of Comcare to be nominated for appointment to the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission, which rectifies inadvertent disqualification of the CEO from nomination for appointment—which occurred in 2012 and arising from changes to the Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988.

This legislation is important. Our military people do have unique responsibilities to our nation. We, as a parliament, have unique responsibilities to them. Fair indexation has gone part of the way to providing our responsibility back to those veterans. This particular legislation enhances that. It is important. Mental health is a big factor for these people. I commend the bill to the House.