



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

BILLS

**Military Rehabilitation and
Compensation Amendment Bill 2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 28 August 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Thursday, 28 August 2014
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Questioner
Speaker Jones, Ewen, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr EWEN JONES (Herbert) (12:13): I am pleased to speak on the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2014. This bill enables the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Commission, or the MRCC, to apply a new formula to retrospectively calculate compensation to former members of the ADF. It also applies enhanced compensation arrangements as applicable. A new methodology was implemented from 1 July 2013. This came about after a review of the military compensation arrangements. The new methodology applies to persons who have an injury or a disease already accepted under the Veterans' Entitlements Act. No veteran will be disadvantaged by the passage of this amendment bill. It is important that we say very clearly that no veteran will be disadvantaged.

The history around this is that, prior to the last election, the government expressed concern about the application of the old formula and its impact on compensation payments to veterans with eligibility under multiple acts.

The coalition has committed to providing support to veterans' orphans and DVA students, and will also support the Veterans' Children Education Scheme. It continues the hard work of the government in legislating better pay and conditions for our veterans and follows on from the DFRDB and DFRB legislation in June. Can I make a personal vote of thanks here in relation to Senator Michael Ronaldson, who has been our veterans' affairs spokesperson since I was elected in 2010 and is now the minister. His efforts here—his efforts inside government, inside opposition—to ensure that we deliver for our veterans should never be underestimated. He is a good man, he has a good team and he works very, very hard. I am pleased to be part of that team.

There will be no financial impact from this bill, and funding was provided in the 2012-13 financial year. The changes proposed in this legislation will enable veterans with such multiple eligibility to be no further disadvantaged in the calculation of their compensation pensions. When you are dealing with veterans and ADF personnel, as we do in our electorate offices on a regular basis, and in places like Townsville, which has a significant veteran population, it is a major part of our role as MPs to work between the soldier, sailor or airman and the department. There are so many cracks in the system. What this government is trying to do is not so much eliminate the cracks but just make them as small as humanly possible. The system will never be perfect. What we are trying to do is make sure that as few people are falling through the cracks as possible. Where the application of this new methodology would result in a lower amount of compensation, the existing amount of compensation will apply until a new assessment results in a higher amount of compensation. Once again, it is recognising the nature of service.

We have over 4,000 DVA clients located in Townsville, in the Townsville area, who have served in the ADF from the Second World War through to the most recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we are proudly home to the 3rd Brigade who, this weekend, celebrates its centenary. In 1914 the 3rd Brigade was formed, and Brigadier Roger Noble will be leading all sorts of things, including the keys to the city, for the 3rd Brigade this weekend. There is an eight-page lift-out in today's *Townsville Bulletin* celebrating the centenary of the 3rd Brigade as we move into what will be four years of tremendous commemoration in relation to our military history.

Being in a Defence Force city, my office has had a great relationship with the local DVA office and the hard work the staff of the DVA do for the ADF community. When Senator Ronaldson was in Townsville last, he made a special effort to get into the DVA to meet the staff and to personally thank them for the work that they do. We always find—my office always finds—that we get a great result and quick communication when we are approached about an issue and the DVA gets involved. This government is also funding an expansion—just as an observation—of the Chinook and the MRH90 helicopter bases and facilities for the 5th Aviation Regiment and the RAAF Base Townsville.

I attended the Legacy ball, or the Defence ball, in Townsville last weekend, supporting local Defence families in need of help from Legacy. I think one of the great things in this country is Legacy and our Legatees. When you are talking about Afghanistan, and you are talking about the nature of service now—there was probably time

during the eighties and nineties when we were thinking that maybe it had had its day—Legacy has a very, very real role to play, and a growing role. Major General Stuart Smith is a Legatee. One of our greatest—one of our best—soldiers in this country is a Legatee. He lost his father in Vietnam, and he would not be the man he is today without Legacy. His mum would never have been able to provide for them without the help of Legacy. So I was very pleased to go along—I am not the world's best auctioneer, but by jingo I am the cheapest—and help them out for the evening.

So the 3rd Brigade is celebrating its centenary this year. Townsville has a strong and proud military history. The support this government gives our veterans is something that we should all be proud of. More than service in war, I think what we have to understand is the nature of service. And Townsville is home to the 3rd Brigade, which is primarily a redeployable organisation. They are an infantry based organisation, and when you think about a pack that a soldier will carry, it weighs about 48 kilos. Deputy Speaker Porter, I do not think you are 48 kilos. Soldiers are in and out of trucks. It is unnatural to carry that much weight while jumping out of trucks and jumping out of helicopters. It puts pressure on all parts around the body. The nature of the industry and the nature of injury is completely and utterly unnatural. My nephew has been accepted into the ADF and he wants to join the Army. When he was talking to me about it I said, 'Anything but infantry, Mate, anything but infantry. You've got to make sure that, when you turn 40, you still have knees, ankles and a back which can be relied on.'

Being a defence city, we do have lots of rivalry. The Army is so big in Townsville. My friend the member for Bass will understand when you talk about stars in the ADF that the Navy navigate by them, the Army sleeps under them, and the RAAF uses them to rate the hotels in which they are going to stay. There is all of that sort of rivalry. At the Defence Ball the other night it was out in force.

Our ADF personnel are looked after. Do we give them everything they want? No. And those of us who have been in this game understand what it is like to deal with veterans when they feel they have been hard done by. Sometimes you cannot fulfil their demands. The first duty of a government is to secure our borders. We ask people to serve and we must do the right thing by those people who do serve. We are coming into four years of commemoration of World War I, Korea and Vietnam. Townsville will be front and centre with the 50th anniversary of Long Tan in 2016. And there were recent fields of conflict—for example, Somalia—when the nature of the relationship between Townsville and the ADF changed overnight. They went from being 'Ajs'—or Army jerks—to being 'our boys'. It is a relationship that our city, our mayor Jenny Hill and the current commander, Brigadier Roger Noble—and previous brigadiers and previous mayors—have worked so hard to foster, to make Townsville a great ADF town. There was Rwanda, Timor-Leste and the war on terror.

I said just recently the nature of war and the nature of the enemy we face is vastly different from that of World War I, and so is the nature of the care we must provide. I never served—Australia would be in a lot of trouble if I were on the front line somewhere—but I do understand what it takes to be a member of the ADF. They must be that 'type A' personality. Is our system perfect and are we perfect at delivering it? Of course not. Are we improving? Of course we are. At every opportunity, every time we deploy and every time we come back, the ADF, DVA and the government try their absolute best to find where the issues are and what can be done differently.

As the previous speaker was saying, PTSD is a very real issue. I have said it before, when people came back from the Boer War and from the First World War we called it 'shell-shock' and we cured it by sending them to the pub. If they did not survive that, we sent them to the fringes of society. In my town, we deal with PTSD every day. We must understand that it is a severe injury. People are wounded when you come home with PTSD and we must face it not just as individuals, not just as families but as entire communities, as an entire country. People in the Defence Force, in this vocation, are under a lot of pressure. We have to understand the nature of that pressure and how to deal with it, knowing that it affects people differently. There is no straight answer to PTSD, and people in uniform like straight answers, don't they? In Townsville, we have to make sure we are prepared for what is to come. People will face these issues and we must be prepared to work with them when they are dealing with them.

I like these amendments. I think they are good for us. Senator Ronaldson, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, is doing a great job for us in this space, showing that this government is making a genuine effort and genuinely cares about our relationship with the ADF. I commend the bill to the House. I thank the House.

Ms SCOTT (Lindsay) (12:24): Today, I rise in support of the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Amendment Bill 2014. It is always a good day when I get the opportunity to rise in this place in support of our esteemed and noble veterans. I would also like to acknowledge the presence of my very good friend, the

member for Bass, our resident brigadier here in the parliament. When we look at the service of our veterans, in the Lindsay community alone, the Department of Veterans' Affairs identifies 1,041 veterans. This is not to mention the servicemen and women and the ex-servicemen and women who live within the Lindsay electorate. We have a RAAF base at Orchard Hills. We have a reserve base at Penrith. To the north of the electorate, we have Richmond RAAF base and, to the west, we also have the Lapstone RAAF base. We have a large Defence community. We need to honour our servicemen and women. These are the people that have defended and still defend our country.

The people of Lindsay have such a long and proud heritage when it comes to our Defence forces. We have served in the Boer War. We have ridden off and formed the Light Horse. We have been on the Western Front. We have been to Borneo, Korea, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, Iraq and Afghanistan. Our troops from our Lindsay electorate have been peacekeepers on every continent of this globe. As a community, we are proud of their service and, as a nation, we are forever in debt to their sacrifices. I would like to commend the work of Lisa Power and Ian Paterson from the Penrith Press for the wonderful commemoration honouring the local diggers of World War I.

This amendment provides a fairer system of compensation review to those 1,041 veterans who make Lindsay their home. When a soldier serves our country, we have a responsibility to all that we can rehabilitate that soldier and ensure they receive the best possible support. Recently, I had the privilege of visiting the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia at St Mary's Outpost, the Train. I had a wonderful day meeting with Greg Cant and Sam Vecchio.

As the member for Lindsay, I was proud to present the Train with \$25,302. This funding is provided under the Building Excellence in Support and Training grants, the BEST grants program, which assist largely with the voluntary ESO workforce to help the veterans and Defence communities access Department of Veterans' Affairs entitlements and services. Each month 20 volunteer welfare officers at the VVAA St Mary's make 400 visits to hospitals right across our community. Greg Cant, the president of the VVAA St Mary's Outpost, said this funding would contribute to local support programs and initiatives. He went on to say:

This funding will allow the VVAA St Mary's to continue to build and grow our network and support more seniors and veterans across St Mary's. We have a dedicated team of volunteers who work tirelessly to support our local veterans community, and I am pleased to receive this federal government grant to ensure we can continue the great work into the future.

Greg also took me for a walk through the Train. He showed me some of the rooms that they have available, where they sit down with veterans and talk to them. They talk to them about some of the PTSD issues that the gentlemen are having. Greg talked about his own experience: he was painting a wall and one of the guys just came up to him and patted him on the back. He did not understand at the time how his own mental health had actually declined but, in doing so, his mates were there to support him.

That is what the Train is there for: to support all the men in St Mary's, all the veterans that come through. The Vietnam guys who for so long have felt forgotten—that is what the Train does. That is what this money does. This money is to build the camaraderie, keep that digger spirit alive that we see so much within the St Mary's Train men.

Today we are going to amend the Military Rehabilitation Compensation Act, which has been in operation for 10 years. The act commenced on 1 July 2004 and was the first compensation legislation designed to cover the whole spectrum of military service. It safeguards by applying a new methodology to maintain or increase transitional, permanent impairment compensation payable. This new provision enables the commission to review the transitional permanent impairment compensation and to retrospectively apply the new methodology to maintain or increase compensation. These amendments will result in a beneficial or neutral-only outcome. No person would be disadvantaged by the retrospective application of the new methodology.

Debate adjourned.