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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Australian Defence Force Cadets

SPEECH

Monday, 27 October 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Fitzgibbon, Joel, MP

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Mr FITZGIBBON (Hunter) (12:49): I am puffing a little because I have just run from the other chamber in time to be here for this very important debate and very important motion, moved, as I understand it, by the member for Herbert. I am sure that makes it a very important contribution. I had an opportunity to listen to some of the contributions of others, and I agree with every word spoken. As a former Minister for Defence, I have had a special opportunity to focus on the work of the Australian Defence Force Cadets, whether it be the Navy Cadets, the Army Cadets or indeed the Air Force Cadets.

All of us, I suspect, have some memory of some awareness of the cadets when we were younger. I was a student at Marist Brothers in Maitland, now called St Peter's, which had a strong cadet unit. I was not a member of the unit because my bus ride home to Cessnock was about 40 minutes in duration, and staying a little longer at night to be part of the cadets was not my first choice in those days. I can say that I lament that decision not to participate because, as a former defence minister in particular and as a regular observer of the work of the cadets at things like Remembrance Day and Anzac Day ceremonies, I now fully appreciate the contribution that they make.

The cadets are first and foremost a youth development organisation. Some people see it as a recruitment organisation. Certainly it does serve that purpose because many of the great experiences that young Australians have in the cadets lead them to have a keen interest in a career in the Australian Defence Force. Of course, in the cadets they learn leadership skills and they learn the art of discipline so important in this modern society, but also they learn to drill and to shoot and a whole range of things that we associate with the Australian Defence Force per se. They are not of course members of the Australian Defence Force but do receive firsthand experience in many of the areas in which our Australian Defence Force service men and women work.

Let me be, I suspect, the first person to say that the cadets have not always been perfect. It is an area not without its challenges. Whenever you are inviting 13- to 20-year-olds together as one, there are challenges, no matter how well intentioned and committed they might be to the cause. The cadets, like many other parts of the Australian Defence Force, have had their incidents over the years—incidents that have been challenging to those in charge of their units and to the Australian Defence Force more generally. That is why we need to be continually looking at and reforming the organisation to make sure it does keep pace with community standards and to ensure that the young people joining are benefiting from the experiences they expected to have as a result of joining the cadets. For example, there was a time—I hope it has changed, and I am confident it has changed—when the paperwork burden for the volunteers who were administering the scheme was so excessive that real-life experiences in camps and on rifle ranges et cetera became not necessarily the norm and gave way to too much theory and classroom teaching.

I am very proud that I was the minister in 2008, when I gave sanction to the then CDF's latest review into the cadets and therefore the reform of the cadets—reforms which I am confident have strengthened the administrative structure and the command structure and will ensure that the cadets continue to provide good experiences for young Australians. Of course our cadets do not just do good work within their units; they do good work out there in the community as well, including a number of community fundraising efforts—something they do in the name of the Australian Defence Force and therefore something which strengthens the branding and image of the Australian Defence Force.

So I pay tribute to those who are running the organisations at the moment, and I pay tribute and say thank you to all those who are participating. May many of them make the decision to join the Australian Defence Force in the future.

Debate adjourned.