THE SENATE

BILLS

Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment (Partner Service Pension and Other Measures) Bill 2019

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 17 September 2019

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
Senator BROCKMAN (Western Australia—Deputy Government Whip in the Senate) (13:29): I rise to make a short contribution on this bill, the Veterans’ Affairs Legislation Amendment (Partner Service Pension and Other Measures) Bill 2019. I will not cover much of the territory covered by Senator Sterle—he explained the provisions of this bill very well—but I do want to make a few brief remarks. I think it’s vital that we always mention, with respect and a recognition, the service that our veterans, our service men and women, have given to this country over a very long period of time, and making sure that that service is recognised appropriately is something that this government is, of course, very committed to.

This bill builds on an ongoing commitment to veterans that equates to over $11 billion annually in contributions. There was $11.5 billion in the 2019-20 budget year alone for supporting veterans and their families. This is important for a reason—not only because it gives us the opportunity to say we recognise their service but also because it actually makes a very real difference in the lives of real people who have served and their loved ones. And you only need to go to one degree of separation to find someone close to you who is a veteran or a family member of a veteran who is helped by these kinds of supports.

I’ll give you an example. One of my young staff members had a grandfather who served in the Royal Navy for six years. As a result of his time in service, he developed a melanoma which unfortunately metastasised and spread rapidly. Thanks to the support that governments of all persuasions have provided, the gold card covered the chemotherapy, the surgical treatments and, eventually, the palliative care for her grandfather. He did pass away, and then the grandmother was eligible, with the assistance of an application supported by the RSL, for a war widow’s pension. Obviously, this was a very, very difficult time for my staff member’s grandmother—a very tough time which included some serious health issues of her own. However, again with the support provided through a war widow’s pension, she managed to get the treatment she needed and is now happy, healthy and living a full life. So these kinds of changes do make a very real difference in the lives of real people and the lives of our veterans.

As Senator Sterle outlined, there are a couple of key changes here, which I will also mention. One is to make sure that the PSP, the partner service pension, is available to eligible partners, former partners, widows and widowers of veterans by changing the definition of ‘partner’ under the legislation to include de facto partners and ex-partners, subject to certain criteria—a postseparation buffer period of 12 months, or until a new relationship is commenced, where ex-partners may still receive the partner service pension. Also there are provisions that cover the situation where, if a service man or woman dies within 12 months of separation, the partner is still able to receive the pension. Obviously, it is very important to change rules to take into account the changing circumstances in our society.

I will also mention, just briefly, the coverage in schedule 2 of the extended service on submarine special operations. These changes came out of a review by the Department of Defence into the nature of service on submarine special operations, and they give effect to the government’s decision for service between 1 January 1993 and 12 May 1997 to be classified as operational and qualifying service under the Veterans’ Entitlements Act. This is an extension to the eligibility period under the VEA, which currently only covers between 1 January 1978 and 31 December 1992.

Submarine special operations are, obviously, highly classified and sensitive, and the nature of these operations is not publicly disclosed. However, this change provides a new cohort of submariners with greater access to treatment, benefits, compensation and income supports. Any claims arising from this service will be assessed under the more generous reasonable hypothesis standard of proof. These submariners will be eligible for the gold card when they turn 70 and may be eligible for the service pension at age 60.

This measure recognises the unique nature of the submarine special operations service and reflects the government’s admiration of the service and the sacrifice of all veterans.