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 DAVEY (New South Wales—The Nationals Whip in the Senate) (13:38): In rising to speak on the Veterans’ Affairs Legislation Amendment (Partner Service Pension and Other Measures) Bill 2019, I note that this is not my first speech. Having previously served in the Royal Australian Army Ordnance Corps as a reservist, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this bill and, in doing so, reaffirm my appreciation and admiration for all the men and women who serve Australia in uniform, both at home and abroad.

It is incumbent on all Australians to respect and recognise our returned servicemen and women, and those who have been prepared to put their lives on the line, literally, for our nation, our values and our way of life. Our veterans have made great sacrifices for our country, and the onus is on us now to support them. Regrettably, our veterans have not always received the support they deserve. This bill takes a significant step towards fixing that. On that note, I want to take this opportunity to commend my Nationals colleague the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs, the Hon. Darren Chester MP, as well as the staff of the Department of Veterans’ Affairs for the work they have done in bringing forward these practical amendments.

This bill contains three sets of amendments. It will improve the outcomes for former partners of veterans receiving the partner service pension, it will extend the benefits available to Australian Defence Force members who served on certain submarine special operations and it will make the technical amendments necessary arising from the changes to the definition of marriage by the Marriage Amendment Act. Together, these amendments will ensure that our veterans pension framework is modern, accessible and equitable and that it recognises the differences in relationship types and removes any form of discrimination from our legislative framework.

The sacrifice made by any partner of a veteran cannot be understated. Once legislated, these amendments will ensure that all partners, be they former, current or widowed, will receive up to 12 months of continued partner pension after the end of a relationship with a veteran or until the partner begins a new relationship. In special circumstances, including where domestic violence occurs, these payments could continue beyond the 12-month deadline. The government has already provided $6.2 million for this measure over the forward estimates, and it will commence on 20 September if passed by parliament.

I am proud of the Nationals track record for delivering services and support for veterans and their families. In government, alongside the Liberal Party, we provide more than $11 billion a year to support around 280,000 veterans and their families, widows and children. But there is still so much work that needs to be done. Many in our veteran community face ongoing difficulties upon returning to their civilian life and they struggle to make the transition. Their families are, of course, impacted by the unique pressures that come with military life and afterwards.

Two recent reports, the first prepared by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, commissioned by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, and the other prepared by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, highlight the challenges our veterans face. It is not good enough that our veterans, who serve our nation selflessly and honourably, then have to face battles of a different kind. They have higher rates of unemployment, homelessness, relationship breakdown and mental health issues. And it is a national tragedy that our veterans are overrepresented in suicide rates. The government are taking practical steps to address the challenges facing our veterans communities. We continue to work hard with stakeholders and people representing veterans communities to ensure that veterans receive the ongoing support they need from both the government and the community at large. This bill is just one part of the government’s broader strategy to achieve that. The amendments in this bill, once legislated, will mean better outcomes for veterans and their families. I commend this bill to the Senate.