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 STEELE-JOHN (Western Australia) (13:43): The content of the Veterans’ Affairs Legislation Amendment (Partner Service Pension and Other Measures) Bill 2019 reflects a wonderful process of realisation in this space that relationships look different today than they might once have done, that Australia has moved forward and that there are certain realities of human relationships that exist that we recognise now and no longer ask to be hidden in the shadows as something shameful. Its measures are the result of a good deal of consultation with the veterans community as well as a much-needed review by the Department of Defence into these relevant matters.

I commend its sections to the chamber as well as noting that, as we pass pieces of legislation in this area, we must always remember and recommit ourselves to that process of deep listening alongside our returned service personnel. We should not simply take the low-hanging fruit and do what we can to generate for ourselves a quick and easy media release that we can fire off to our email lists, but do the hard work—sit down with veterans who have experienced deep trauma, sit down with their families, and grapple, fearlessly, with the very many complex and intertwined emotional and social ramifications of someone’s service in the armed forces. It can be a difficult thing to do. It can be a harrowing thing to do.

As a senator, having recently taken on this particular area of responsibility, it has been a journey towards the realisation that the actions of this parliament, or indeed the inaction of this parliament, have a very profound effect upon folks who rightly feel themselves to have begun participating in a process which would always place them at the centre of our national debates and at the centre of the deep-thinking processes of this place only to return from their service and confront bureaucracies and systems which they often experience to be more difficult to confront and more traumatic to experience that those which they may have confronted in combat zones.

There has been much work done in the last years on attempting to improve these processes or at least to be seen to attempt to improve these processes. However, I have, in my short time in this role, received enough correspondence and feedback from people working in this space that speaks to me very clearly the reality that there is a lot more work to do so that our systems and processes properly support returned service personnel, their families and the people who have been impacted by their service to our nation in those particular roles.

I can’t help but, on moments like this, when we consider such legislation that calls upon us to reflect on the responsibilities that we have to those who serve in our armed forces, to observe the strange absence that is at the heart of this chamber’s responsibility in this space when it comes to the issue of the absence of a war powers act in Australia. I have never been able to square it, and can no more square it now, that neither we in this chamber nor those in the chamber opposite are asked to take full responsibility for the implications of entering into that armed service space in times of war. And I would reiterate at this moment that my party, the Greens, advocates for the chambers to take on that clear-eyed responsibility and to decide that we should never again place our armed service personnel in harm’s way, telling them to go elsewhere and defend this nation, without being prepared to vote for that action and take on the responsibility for the impacts of that action. That being said, I commend this bill to the chamber.