THE SENATE

VETERANS’ ENTITLEMENTS AMENDMENT (DIRECT DEDUCTIONS AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2004

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 24 June 2004

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE
This Bill is pretty straightforward.

In short it provides for a number of amendments to the Veterans’ Entitlements Act some of which could affect a very small number of veterans and widows.

They flow directly from a number of anomalies and technical drafting issues which need to be addressed to provide for some minor items of fairness.

I won’t go into the detail as that has already been done on my behalf by the Member for Cowan in the other place.

There’s little to add to that, except that one reform is very worthwhile.

That’s the direct deductions amendment.

Flowing from this will be an ability for the first time, for veterans and war widows to have regular payments deducted from their pensions by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs.

This’ll be of enormous benefit to veterans who now either have to pay in cash or by cheque.

For things like rent payable to a public housing authority, this is very difficult.

Sometimes it involves a great deal of inconvenience—as well as for families.

The same will be possible for deductions into other accounts, and for mortgage repayments, for example.

This is an enormous convenience for older people who’ve trouble getting out.

It also means they don’t have to worry about paying on time because it’s done for them.

They don’t have to risk paying penalties for late payment any more.

However, given that this should have been done long ago, why has this Bill taken since 25 March to get through the House of Representatives?

One can only wonder why it is that the Minister for Veterans’ Affairs seems to be asleep at the wheel.

The rest of the Bill is quite uncontroversial.

As usual we find with these omnibus bills some technical corrections fixing drafting or unforeseen issues.

It’s also unfortunate that sometimes we see amendments to the Veterans’ Entitlements Act made necessary by previous changes to the Social Security Act.

In this case there’s one such change with respect to superannuation assets, which was made to the Social Security Act in 1995.

But 9 years later, it’s now introduced into the VEA.

Why does it take so long for these two Acts to be brought into line?

In fact, how did they get out of line in the first place?

Perhaps there’s actually been a task of reconciliation undertaken to identify the inconsistencies and to fix them.

If that’s the case then credit is due, but the fact remains that the gaps should not be allowed in the first place.
As I commented on another Bill in the Senate earlier in the week, there does seem to be some dysfunction between these two departments.

In fact it seems to me there’s direct conflict on some policy. But it’s a conflict which is full of contradictions.

This may well be the last piece of veterans’ legislation to come before the Parliament before the election.

I say that advisedly because I understand there is another Bill just introduced implementing changes to the VEA flowing from the Prime Minister’s vote buying in the sugar industry.

It’s appropriate therefore, in the time available to me, to reflect on the consideration of the Parliament of veterans’ issues over the last three years.

To begin with I must say that typically, there’s been very little concentrated focus on veterans issues at all.

True, there’s been a very large piece of legislation passed for a new military rehabilitation and compensation scheme.

While it has some major imperfections and unsatisfactory compromises, it’s at least one scheme.

It does remove the system of dual eligibility which has been so messy for over 30 years.

But of course it affects nobody—yet.

The current unsatisfactory system of two schemes being administered side by side will continue for another 80 years at least.

I know the Minister is so proud of what she sees as a major accomplishment.

But I think most would agree that it was achieved in spite of her. That Bill was foreshadowed as long ago as 1994.

In fact the only contribution made by this Government in the veterans’ affairs portfolio in the last three years has been one of procrastination.

There’s no greater symbol of this than the Clarke report. Costing $1.7 million this review was set up for one reason.

That was to keep the veterans’ portfolio policy free for three years.

That way the Minister could defer for three years any hard questions for which veterans needed answers.

And that’s exactly what happened.

In the meantime the ministerial diary could be devoted to lots of ribbon cutting around the world and posing for photo opportunities.

In fact I must say that of all the feedback I’ve received from the veteran community, the strongest is the objection to the politicisation of veterans’ affairs.

Veterans’ view of the Government is that veterans are only of use for publicity purposes.

This point is made so aptly by Vietnam veterans who have recently seen the Long Tan scholarships converted to a media stunt for Government Members and Senators.

These scholarships worth $6000 for one year of study for veterans’ children, are advertised for selection late in the year, for announcement well before the academic term begins in the following year. Not this year.

The Minister, in typical fashion converted the entire process to one of her own glorification.

The entire process was commandeered.

Functions and morning teas were organised and the Department was pressed into service to produce media releases for all Government backbenchers and Senators.

As a result the announcement was delayed until May. This is simply disgraceful.

It is one thing to manipulate veterans in the Government propaganda machine, but it is something entirely different to use their children.

Too late Minister.
Too cynical and too self serving.
That of course does highlight again the poverty of the Government’s attitude to veteran policy.
The policy with respect to the health of veterans’ children is a case in point.
The 1998 morbidity study of Vietnam veterans’ children provided a sharp shock to veterans for what it revealed about the health of their children.
What they suspected was confirmed.
That is, there were some very serious problems indeed.
In short, congenital abnormalities varied from three to eleven times the expected rate.
Death from suicide was reported at three times the expected rate.
The reported incidence of cancer was also found to be higher.
In the following year a validation study was undertaken which in large part confirmed these reported findings.
Little has happened since.
Yet veterans continue to be concerned at the health of their children.
Labor has already announced that when elected to government we’ll conduct a detailed fresh study of the health of Vietnam veterans’ children.
We simply cannot allow this issue to fade away unattended.
Some credit is of course due.
Labor has always been willing to recognise initiatives which benefit veterans.
That’s why we inevitably agree to legislation providing better benefits.
Those included in the Bills that passed the Senate last Monday evening are a case in point.
We were pleased to be able to support the initiatives giving rent assistance to war widows.
Likewise we support the effective exemption of disability pension from the means test.
This is notwithstanding the technical policy issues which sometimes leave a lot to be desired.
In fact there is nothing we have failed to support.
However, we in Labor do not resile from our responsibility in attacking the Government whenever it reneges on commitments.
That is our responsibility on behalf of veterans.
There have over the course of the last three years been numerous instances of this.
As the election approaches it is timely to remind veterans that there remain at least two open sores.
The first is the cutback to the Home Care program costing $4 million next year.
The Minister’s lame defence is that the budget is pegged to the number of card holders.
But this is not a suitable measure.
As we all know, frailty increases with age. Services required need to increase.
Any reduction in card holders is more than made up for by increasing need.
The second is the continuing and increasing refusal of medical specialists to accept the Gold card.
The Government’s budget announcement does not take effect until next January.
And even then there’s absolutely no assurance that specialists will find what’s on offer nearly attractive enough.

I’ll leave my remarks there. This particular Bill isn’t controversial.

It’s a great pity that it was not put before us many months ago. Thank you.