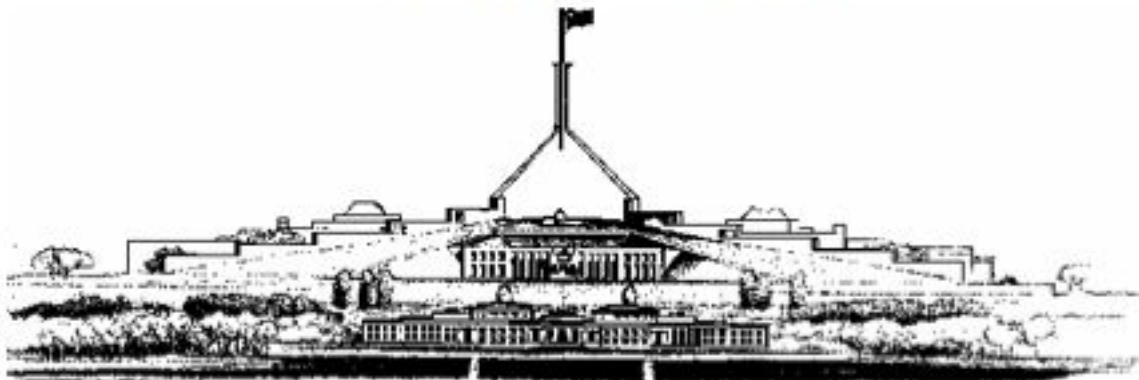




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMETARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

REMEMBRANCE DAY

SPEECH

Wednesday, 12 November 2008

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

Senator BOYCE (Queensland) (1.38 pm)—I rise today, the day after the 90th anniversary of Armistice Day, and I ask the same question that many would have asked on the day after the first Armistice Day: what do we do now?

What can we do to continue to make meaningful the many sacrifices since then—in World War II, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam and Timor Leste—and the sacrifices still being made in Iraq and Afghanistan?

On November 11 we pause to remember, but what do we do on the day after?

Recently I visited the South-East Queensland country town of Kalbar, near Beaudesert. It is a small town of about 600 people, but it is getting bigger as Brisbane expands ever outwards. It has a very nice coffee shop and a public hall where, in a small room at the front, the Kalbar RSL has its headquarters. I was there to present a number of flags to the members of the Kalbar RSL for use on their flagpole and for veterans' funerals.

Bearing in mind the nature of the occasion, there were, of course, formal speeches and official photographs at their beautifully and peacefully located war memorial, overlooking the valley. On Anzac Day up to half the town's population gathers there, and yesterday there was a similarly well-attended ceremony that was at once peculiarly intimate and local but, as well, national and global in its significance.

My hosts when I visited—Bob Pearson, Ced Gilloway, Geoff Burnell, Barry Unsworth, James Host, Greg Smith and Brian Prickett—gave me a very warm welcome.

Of course, this area around Boonah is renowned for producing fine soldiers, particularly for the mounted infantry units. In fact, Boonah's troop was the 2/14 Light Horse Regiment, formed in 1930 through the amalgamation of two other regiments, the 2nd Moreton Light Horse and the 14th West Moreton Light Horse.

Queensland Trooper David Pearce is the 2/14 regiment's most recent casualty and I would like to acknowledge now his sacrifice in Afghanistan.

There was also another member of the Kalbar RSL there on the day of my visit—World War II veteran Emslie 'Butch' Regeling. Butch did not let his walking frame handicap him for a minute. He actively and energetically participated in all parts of the visit, hauling himself up and down the stairs of the Kalbar RSL headquarters and waving away assistance to get over a soft spot in the grass with his walking frame.

The next day, Butch passed away, and I know that the many people who attended his funeral miss him greatly.

Sadly, this was the first 'opportunity' for the Kalbar RSL to use the funeral flag that I had presented on my visit.

Butch was born in 1924 and, like many young men in country Queensland, he enlisted in the Army during World War II, seeing it as a great adventure. Butch was a proud member of the Light Horse and was one of the seven troopers who rode out from Darwin all the way to Townsville to check for infiltrators after the Japanese bombings in 1941. It sounds like

a boy's own adventure today, but the seemingly real possibility then of meeting with Japanese invaders and the need to travel covertly meant that it certainly was not, at the time, a boy's own adventure.

Unfortunately, Butch is the fourth member of the Kalbar RSL who has passed away this year. We no longer, as a nation, have any World War I veterans, and our World War II and Vietnam veterans are beginning to pass on in increasing numbers as well. With their deaths our opportunity as a nation to honour them and their families in their lifetimes is rapidly diminishing.

In the First World War—the war to end all wars—Kalbar lost 14 of her young men overseas. For such a tiny community that was a very heavy price to pay and most families in the town were personally affected. We promised our returned soldiers and sailors and airmen that we would look after them and that we would honour the sacrifices they made. We made that promise to their sons, their daughters and all their families, not just in Kalbar but in every community throughout Australia.

Today is the day after Remembrance Day. Yet, tomorrow, the government will introduce the Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment (Further 2008 Budget and Other Measures) Bill 2008. It sounds extremely innocuous, but this bill—section 2 of the bill in particular—is a mean-spirited little attempt to strip the partner service pension from the separated partners of veterans. All up, it is estimated that this section of the bill will directly impact on 580 spouses and partners of veterans.

This is allegedly going to save the government \$40 million over four years. The projected savings are in fact questionable, given that many of the costs will be simply shifted to unemployment and other programs.

This is a mean little bill. It pushes the separated spouses or partners of veterans under age pensionable age off the partner service pension and onto Centrelink programs such as Newstart.

I will talk a little about a woman who wrote to me about her situation. She wrote:

My husband and I have been married for 38 years. I met him just after his return from Vietnam and we married 5 months later. To say that our marriage has been traumatic is an understatement and I have lost count of how many times we have separated and then been reunited again. I even went as far as divorcing him at one stage, only to end up back in the relationship and married again.

It is only in the last 15 or so years that I have begun to learn about the effects of war on otherwise presumably 'normal' young men.

Living with a traumatised returned serviceman is like walking on eggshells. You never knew when there was going to be another outburst of anger or to what extent that anger would be expressed. My husband prided himself on the fact that he would never hit a woman but he hit many things around me instead ...

I would often keep my children in another room until he had left for work, because it was easier than having him abuse them and go off the deep end and then me having to calm them down afterwards and get them off to school....

As a result of all this and the need to care for him closely I have had to give up working and even enjoying a lot of activities outside of the house because he just can't bear to have me gone for too long ...

With this new bill, if it is passed, I realised that I could not support myself if my service pension was cancelled after 12 months. I have lost the capacity to work in any of the positions that I have had in the past.

There are hundreds of other stories like this, of people who will be trapped by the government's attempt to save a few dollars.

Numerous veterans, particularly of the Vietnam War, experience stress, disability and posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of their war service and so, vicariously, do their families. Unsurprisingly, as the letter shows, this leads to a much higher incidence of separation and divorce.

Many submissions to the inquiry into this bill by the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs told further of women who were worn out from caring for their partner or who sometimes needed to leave home for their own safety and the safety of their children. The submission from the Partners of Veterans Association noted:

The fact is, that these separated wives are still legally married to the Veteran and are to be penalised because they could no longer, for any number of reasons and often, after many years of marriage, continue to cohabit with their veteran husband due to his war caused disability. Australian Partners of Veterans should be afforded more resources, support and assistance rather than be discarded ...

The Partners of Veterans Association went on to note that they felt betrayed by this government. They said: *Prior to the Labor Government winning the 2007 Election, there was no mention in any election policy that there would be any cuts to the Veteran community. Indeed Labor's Plan for Veterans' Affairs stated that they were committed to 'the care of families of veterans in recognition that it is not just veterans themselves who make personal sacrifices to defend our country'.*

Contrast that pre-election rhetoric with the reality. The partners of veterans organisation points out that this legislation would mean that:

... the whole veteran family is worse off financially despite assurances that no veteran would be worse off.

The newly elected Labor MP for Blair spoke on this bill during the second reading debate in the House of Representatives, and it is worthwhile quoting what he very insensitively had to say to veterans and their partners:

The situation is that from 1 January 2009 any spouse of a veteran who has been separated from that veteran for 12 months or more will cease to be eligible for the partner service pension. Eligibility will also cease if the veteran has entered or

enters a marriage-like relationship with another person. It is a fact that people separate and move on.

The problem with this statement of course is that in this situation many spouses and partners do not move on. From all the correspondence that I have received it is evident that in fact this is not the case. People do not separate and move on.

One woman separated from her husband in 1999 but is not divorced and is still caring for her husband. Another woman wrote to tell me that she had moved to a caravan in the driveway of her home. She cares deeply for her husband and undertakes the care of him as well but often she has grave concerns for her own safety. Time and time again women especially have demonstrated to me that people do not just separate and move on in this situation.

While I was at Kalbar it was suggested to me that we need to acknowledge the contribution made by the partners of those, in the main, men who served us in the Vietnam War. They suggested a badge or a certificate to acknowledge that war affects not just those who serve but those who stay behind to look after the families and homes, those who in many ways take on the duties of a single parent and then find that when their partner comes home they must take on the role of carer as well.

This is the critical issue that we need to consider on the day after Remembrance Day. We have a duty of care to all of our veterans and their families. It is not about the money as far as these veterans and their partners are concerned; it is about the principle of this nation justly owing veterans and their families.

We must decisively oppose what the defence services call the 'civilianisation of benefits'. A Centrelink payment is money given to assist those in need. A Veterans' Affairs payment is given because we as a nation owe those veterans and their families for their service to this nation. It is a pension for service—simple and straight.

On the day after Remembrance Day we must be prepared to fight for the rights of those who fought for us. On the day after we must stand with the families of those to whom we owe a debt and remember that it is a debt; it is not some sort of welfare benefit.

On the day after we should be asking: what can we do for those who have fallen—those 14 young men from Kalbar, Trooper David Pearce, Trooper Butch Regeling and the many, many others? Can I suggest that honouring their memory and honouring their families is one very valid way of remembering that service.

On the day after the 90th anniversary of the armistice we must stand in parliament and declare that we will honour our debts and that the service of our veterans and their families will be properly and honourably remembered.