



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

McCombe, Mr Tim, OAM, Johnston, Mr Ashley

SPEECH

Thursday, 5 March 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Thursday, 5 March 2015</p> <p>Page 115</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Lambie, Sen Jacqui</p>	<p>Source Senate</p> <p>Proof Yes</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Senator LAMBIE (Tasmania) (20:06): I rise to regretfully inform Australia's Senate that one of our great warriors and family man and veterans advocate, Tim McCombe OAM, died of a heart attack on 31 January 2015. He died at 1 am on Saturday morning at Bowral and District Hospital, New South Wales. Tim had worked tirelessly for veterans welfare since 1981. He was closely involved in the agent orange royal commission and every veterans issues since.

His funeral, which I attended, was held on 14 February 2015 and following is the eulogy, written by Graham Walker, on behalf of the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia:

There is sadness in the veteran community for we have lost a champion. Tim McCombe OAM served in 4th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment in Malaya and Borneo during Indonesian Confrontation then, volunteered to transfer to the 2nd Battalion which was preparing for war service in Vietnam.

In Phuoc Tuy Province Tim stepped on a mine, was blown into the air, landing some metres away. He was seriously wounded. He lost one leg above the knee. The other was saved but needed a brace for support. Tim spent many months in hospital and a year and a half in rehabilitation. But as is so often the case, the trauma of the event left psychological scars as well. The reduced mobility, the pain and the psychological damage, later led Tim into some years of depression and despair. He dropped into a black hole, he later related, and wondered whether he would ever emerge. But emerge he did

In 1981, Tim joined the band of Vietnam veterans led by Phil Thompson. They were counselling sick and troubled veterans, campaigning for the establishment of counselling centres and seeking recognition of the harmfulness of exposure to Agent Orange. The headquarters of the Vietnam Veterans Association, as the group was called, was a storeroom at the back of an old Granville RSL hall. There, Mick Scrace, Norm Robinson, Terry Loftus, Ross Mangano, Lachlan Irvine and many others were renovating the storeroom into cramped offices with donated partitioning material. They were a resourceful lot, with a cement truck of unknown origin turning up to fill the formwork for a set of back steps and an army truck, perhaps mistaking the Granville headquarters for its official destination, disgorging used furniture.

These cramped offices and those who worked in them became a lifeline for so many troubled Vietnam veterans. Tim quickly became involved in everything. He was later to explain that having been through those dark years he became determined to help others suffering war trauma.

In 1982, the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service opened its first office in Adelaide. In recognition of the influence this group had in its establishment, Phil Thompson was included in the staff selection panel and gave a speech at the opening. Tim became a member of the National Advisory Committee overseeing its operations.

In 1983, the Agent Orange Royal Commission was established and Tim spent many hours assisting the lawyers prepare the case at the Association's Royal Commission headquarters in Newtown, Sydney. After the Royal Commission reported in 1985 it was Tim who discovered that large tracts of the report were copied verbatim from the chemical company's submissions. More importantly, Tim was unhappy that certain favourable findings of the Royal Commission had not encouraged the acceptance of chemical related compensation claims. So Tim began sponsoring appeals. By the early 90s Tim had sponsored a score of successful Agent Orange cases at the Veterans Review Board and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. This was a remarkable achievement that marked Tim as a major force in the veteran community.

Tim's success with the Agent Orange cases showed determination and patience as did his campaign to have prostate cancer linked with smoking. Some fifteen years ago, Tim appealed against a decision not to recognise the link. Dissatisfied with the initial appeal decision, Tim took the matter to two Federal Court hearing and a hearing of the NSW Court of Appeal. It seemed to go on endlessly. Tim finally had success in 2013. However,

that success was recently overturned and Tim was again commissioning evidence to continue the fight. If Tim believed in the justice of the cause, he would not let go. He was a bulldog.

And what of Tim's integrity? In 2005 Tim was offered the trip of a lifetime. He was invited to join a government sponsored party to the upcoming Anzac Day commemoration at Gallipoli. It was, Tim wrote in reply to the invitation, a trip he would dearly love to make. But this was a time when the Vietnam Veterans Federation was deeply dissatisfied with the government's response to a long list of important veterans' issues. Tim concluded his reply saying, '...for the President of our Federation to accept personal favours from a government guilty of treating our war veterans... in such ways, would be improper.' He, along with Blue Ryan, then the National President of the TPI Federation, declined the invitation.

And it was not only such weighty matters that interested Tim. He has assisted thousands of veterans and Australian Defence Force members to lodge compensation claims and advocated hundreds of their cases before the Veterans Review Board and the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. Helping worthy veterans by winning their cases gave Tim great satisfaction. Indeed, Tim was preparing several Veterans Review Board appeals when he died. And even while he was preparing these appeals, Tim was suffering continual pain from shrapnel emerging from his leg.

Of course I could go on for some time listing the campaigns Tim fought on behalf of sick and troubled veterans and their families. But it is, I think, suffice to say that with compassion, dogged determination and integrity, for over thirty years, Tim fought for veterans' interests. He was New South Wales Branch President and National President of the Vietnam Veterans Federation for twenty years; a measure of the respect in which he was held by the membership.

As the attendance today shows, he was also held in high regard by the wider veteran community. There is sadness in the veteran community for we have lost a champion.

That ends the eulogy written by Graham Walker on behalf of the Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia.

Tim McCombe is survived by his wife, Tran, his daughter, Stephanie, and son, Craig. On behalf of all Tasmanians I pass on my deepest condolences to them. The McCombes have lost a loving husband and father, the veterans community has lost a bloody champion and Australia has lost a loving son. Lest we forget.

I would also like to express my deepest condolences and sympathy to Amanda Johnson of Canberra, whose son, Ashley Johnson, was killed recently. Ashley was a former member of the Australian Army and was reportedly killed fighting with the Kurds against Islamic State. All reports say he died a hero, fighting Islamic State terrorists, who are our enemies. And I am alarmed by media reports that say:

Under the Foreign Incursions Act, Mr Johnston would have faced 20 years' jail if he had returned.

I do not think we should turn Australians who fight against our enemy into criminals who could face 20 years in jail. The media report goes on to say that the Kurdish group YPG, which was fighting the Islamic State butchers and who Ashley was fighting alongside, had:

... received shipments of weapons carried to the region on board RAAF transport planes but under the law Australians who fight for the group are considered terrorists just like Australians who fight for IS.

That means that Australia as a nation can supply weapons to an ally or an organisation that is fighting against our enemy and not be doing anything illegal but if Australian citizens take up those arms, supplied by the Australian government, against a common enemy, then those Australian citizens are guilty of a crime. It does not make any sense. We should be pinning medals on anyone who is brave enough to fight Islamic State savages. We should not be criminalising them. I would like to express my deepest condolences and sympathies to Ashley's mother, Amanda Johnson. Ashley was a hero who died fighting a group of people who seek to destroy us and the Australian way of life. May he rest in peace.

Earlier this week I organised a meeting with the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party and foreign minister, Julie Bishop. I took to that meeting the Mayor of Devonport and Chairman of the Australian Masters Games Committee, Cradle Coast Authority, Mr Steve Martin. I am grateful that the foreign minister agreed to meet with Mayor Martin, because it appears that his clear-speaking and passionate advocacy has meant that the Australian

Masters Games will be secured for the north and north-west of Tasmania for 2017. Up until the meeting with Minister Bishop the state and federal Liberals have been fighting over government funding of the games. The fighting between the two of them had endangered the holding of the games in the north and north-west of Tasmania in 2017.

Liberal members like Brett Whiteley, the member for Braddon, have been caught sitting on their hands and doing nothing to try to secure a commitment of \$750,000 of federal funding. Once Mr Whiteley caught wind of the meeting he promptly invited himself along and then claimed credit for a commitment of \$750,000 of federal funding, which was holding up similar commitments from the state and local governments. Mr Whiteley was so embarrassed about his poor performance that he even tried to stop Mayor Martin from coming to Canberra and having a meeting with the foreign minister so that we could secure that funding. He kept making promises that Mayor Martin would receive a letter from the federal government confirming the investment of \$750,000 and that there was no need for Mayor Martin to attend the meeting I had organised. Of course, Mr Whiteley's promised letter confirming federal funding was never received by Mayor Martin, and it took the face-to-face meeting with Minister Bishop on Tuesday for him to receive verbal support for the \$750,000 federal government funding.

On Wednesday 4 March Mayor Martin wrote very graciously to the deputy Liberal leader and said:

Dear Deputy Prime Minister Bishop,

Thank you for taking the time yesterday, along with your colleagues and Senator Lambie, to discuss the current situation surrounding the availability of Federal funding for securing of the 2017 Australian Masters Games (Games) in partnership with the Confederation of Australian Sport, Tasmanian State Government and the Cradle Coast Authority - representing the nine NW Coast of Tasmania Councils .

As discussed and as advised - Minister Robb will be providing a letter to the Tasmanian State Government advising that upon their application for \$750,000 to be made available and allocated to the Games, that such would be expeditiously approved by Minister Robb.

It is understood that Minister Robb is overseas and expected to return this Friday 6th March.

This clarification and confirmation of the allocation of funds, now enables us to further the effort including strengthening the opportunity of Chinese and other international athletes attending the 2017 Games in Tasmania.

Thank you again.

Steve Martin

Chairman, Australian Masters Games Committee, Cradle Coast Authority

I commend Mayor Martin for his energy and advocacy for the 2017 Masters Games, which I believe was secured during our meeting with Minister Bishop. If it is lost to the mainland, to a city like Newcastle in New South Wales—which, I am informed, is pushing like hell to steal the games from Tasmania—it will be because of the lazy, casual 'She'll be right' attitude of the Liberal members of Tasmania, including the Liberal member for Braddon, Mr Whiteley, and Andrew Nikolic, the member for Bass. The 2017 Masters Games will bring more than \$8 million and hundreds of extra jobs into the economy of the north and north-west of Tasmania, and by God, I can assure you we need it.

I have been closely monitoring the feedback from Tasmanians, Australian Defence Force members, their families, and veterans regarding the Abbott government's offer to increase their pay offer by 0.5 per cent. I will decide on my final position after I consult with the people of Tasmania and Defence families next week. However, tonight I will share some of the feedback I have received to date on the Abbot 0.5 per cent pay offer. One email reminds me that I should not forget that the war allowance was reduced from \$200 per day to \$150 per day. It reads:

This War Zone' allowance was held at \$200 per day for over 10 years — suffice to say, it never increased during that period, no indexation — no adjustment!

Our troops have been over there fighting for 12 years, and we have not given them a raise as danger money. It is a case of, 'We thank you for your service and we are ripping another 50 bucks off you a day.' This is the way our parliament treats our soldiers, our men and women, our veterans. The email continues:

Then, as part of the sneaky ADF Pay Rise, this one deduction was snuck through and no one has noticed it!

I have mates with 2 Commando Regiment currently in Iraq, who are more than aware of this additional pay cut... which was a real cut of -25% - i.e. \$50 dollars per days or \$350 per week when deployed to a war zone!!!

We are ripping \$350 a week off these men and women who are prepared to have a bullet in their head for their country. And the Liberal-Nationals party can sit there with their heads held high and be proud of that. Quite frankly, I say this: shame on you; absolute shame on you. It goes on:

Then on top of that, the rents of both Barracked and Marriage quarters in Australia were increased by 4% during November/December 2014.

When you add these 3 items together, our ADF members' (both in Australia and Deployed) had real wage cuts... well beyond the pithy pay deal of 1.5%.

How low can this Abbott government go? They take 25 per cent of the danger money from people in the Middle East who at every second are risking their lives for us and for our country. I would like to know how many senators would risk their lives for less than about \$60 or \$70 a day. Politicians get more travel allowance than those boys do in Afghanistan, Iraq and the Middle East right now for putting their lives on the line and coming back to their country in a box.

There are other injustices regarding our troops deployed in Iraq that this Senate must know about. This relates to a systematic flaw in the military injury compensation process that covers our diggers. Put simply: if you are a digger who has been in our military for 20 years, you are covered by three compensation acts, and if you are wounded or hurt while serving in Iraq you could receive up to three times less in compensation than a digger who has been in the military for five years. I have been made aware of a case where a veteran of more than 20 years service in East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, who was diagnosed by medical specialists with multiple disabilities and injuries adding up to more than 80 per cent or 80 points and who should have received more than \$400,000 in compensation, had his compensation payment downgraded to about \$40,000 through a bureaucratic process called offsetting. Actually, it was just downgraded because a public servant said so; let's just put it how it is.

Put simply, if this veteran had only served for five years and been covered under one act he would have received all of that money. Yet the Liberal and National parties have known about this—this is the offsetting process that Howard brought in. The veterans affairs minister knows about this, but he is so busy parading himself around, when it comes to the Anzac Centenary, that he has absolutely forgotten he is supposed to be the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. I would simply say this: it is quite obvious to me and to many of the veterans out there that this man, this veterans affairs minister, Senator Ronaldson, cannot do two jobs at once. I am asking the Prime Minister to have a good look at this situation because right now I have veterans out there suffering. They are being ripped off—absolutely ripped off. Not only that; in the long run it is going to cost the Commonwealth a fortune because by doing this the Department of Veterans' Affairs, by its own hands, is causing more psychological damage to these veterans of ours.

I can see the Liberal senators over there will not even hold their heads up, and I know why. You take a pay cut—

Senator Payne: You know nothing!

Senator LAMBIE: You ripped them off. You ripped off our veterans. You should be ashamed of yourself.

Senator Payne: You know nothing!

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! On my right. Senator Lambie, direct your comments to the chair.

Senator LAMBIE: This is a woman over here—

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order!

Senator LAMBIE: who would not stand there and take a round for her country!

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! Senator Lambie, you will resume your seat now. Order! On my right. Interjections are disorderly. No more interjections, please. Senator Lambie, when I call for order you must address the chair. Now direct your comments through the chair as directed, please.

Senator LAMBIE: It is quite obvious to me that the Liberals have no idea what is going on in veterans affairs, just as I have said. They have no idea what is going on whatsoever. As a matter of fact, I doubt very much if they could stand up and explain to me what the offsetting process is—but if one of them would like to have a go at that, feel free to stand up and interject.

The process of offsetting of our veterans compensation claims must be stopped. Our veterans and diggers must receive fair pay compensation. The Abbott government and the National party have to stop ripping the guts out of them.