



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

**Vietnam Veterans Day,
Shipbuilding Industry, Illicit Drugs**

SPEECH

Tuesday, 18 August 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Tuesday, 18 August 2015 Page 90 Questioner Speaker Lambie, Sen Jacqui</p>	<p>Source Senate Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
--	--

Senator LAMBIE (Tasmania) (21:03): Today is the 49th Vietnam Veterans Day, and next year will mark the 50th anniversary. I take this opportunity to remember and honour the 521 Australians who died fighting in that war. Because of Senate duties, I could not attend the official ceremonies in Canberra today, so earlier this morning I went to that beautiful Vietnam veterans memorial in Canberra and laid some flowers and reflected on their and their families' sacrifices. I was lucky enough to catch up with a few veterans who were out early this morning, and I acknowledge the strong feelings that are stirred up on this day. I thank the families and friends of those 521 Australian Defence Force members for enduring their terrible loss so we can live free and enjoy the democratic rights and privileges we often take for granted.

Of course, unfortunately, the deaths of our Vietnam soldiers, airmen and sailors did not stop in Vietnam. Too many of the more than 60,000 members of the Australian Defence Force who survived their time overseas in Vietnam lost their lives back home in Australia and continue to lose their lives because of the physical and mental damage they experienced during their service and in their transition into civilian life.

I would like to think we have learnt the lessons from the avoidable tragedies and injustices that our Vietnam veterans were forced to suffer, but unfortunately we have not. Over the last 15 years there has been another cohort of 70,000 young Australians who once again swore an oath, trained and were sent overseas to fight. Unfortunately, they are suffering similar avoidable tragedies and injustices to those that our Vietnam veterans were forced to suffer. Their rates of suicide, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse and homelessness are likely to be as great as, if not greater than, those of our Vietnam veterans. All that I and many others can do is shake our heads and say: why? Why haven't we fixed this up?

I recently met with a fine, articulate young man, Peter Mullaly. Peter was a graduate of our Army's officer-training facility at Duntroon and served on active duty in Iraq as well as in disaster relief operations both domestically and overseas. As an officer Peter spent his captain's years in various headquarters positions, contingency management, operations management and training development as well. He was medically discharged last year in August, after 10 years of service. Within six months he was living, homeless, in a tent on the south coast of NSW. He now has accommodation and was rescued from homelessness by a former commando, Geoff Evans, who through RSL LifeCare runs a brilliant program called Homes for Heroes.

But how did this fine young Australian man end up homeless? Why did this outrageous injustice happen? I have made a YouTube recording of my interview with Peter, where he says: 'I was then left in a position where they'—the Army—'had accepted liability. Defence was to blame for what you are experiencing. Then you are told there is an unknown period of time—maybe six, likely 12, months—before you will find out about your pension and compensation. And that's if you don't have to go through extra reviews and extra medical tests and the like. In that period you will get \$300 to \$600 a fortnight.' I will just repeat that last figure: a digger, an officer, a veteran who was medically discharged because of injuries that the Army accepted had been caused during his service, struggled to survive on \$300 to \$600 a fortnight. This young hero received less than someone on Newstart while he was forced to wait months for the government bureaucrats in DVA and ComSuper to get the paperwork done so that he could receive his full entitlements. And Peter is not alone. Time after time I have heard the same story. Our young veterans are struggling to survive on a few hundred dollars a week because this government's incompetent veterans' affairs minister—who is swanning off around the world pretending he cares for our veterans—cannot fix the appalling dysfunction within his department.

Here is what the former Captain Peter Mullaly says should happen to fix this bureaucratic mess we now call the Department of Veterans' Affairs: 'The first step is to take the approach that veterans' affairs is not reactive. You shouldn't be waiting for the veteran to get to that point to ask for things to be put into paperwork. Veterans' affairs and all things veterans' affairs needs to be a proactive process that starts well before they leave Defence. The process and the paperwork needs to start before they lose defence entitlements, or before they are discharged. And these are unwell people in a lot of cases, and you can't be in a situation where you are waiting for unwell

people to understand a complicated and convoluted act, and it needs to seek to benefit the veteran. At the moment it's the complete opposite. The issues I would describe between DVA and ComSuper is it shouldn't be there to start off with. They are two different organisations with different roles and different criteria, they shouldn't be linked and over time one must happen first before you are entitled to the other. They serve different purposes. There is nothing stopping the process to occur concurrently and prior to your discharge.'

So today, on the 49th anniversary of Vietnam Veterans Day, I say to Senator Ronaldson: you are incompetent. You should resign. Your incompetence has caused horrific and unnecessary physical, psychological and financial harm, homelessness among our veterans and family breakdowns. As a matter of fact, so far this year there have been 17 known suicides, but still nobody wants to call a royal commission. Nobody wants to examine what is going on in veterans' affairs and why we are losing so many of our diggers.

I give warning to this Liberal government: I am going to do everything I can as a senator to ensure that Tasmania plays a lead role in the Pacific Patrol Boat project. Australia needs up to 22 vessels to replace the current fleet of ageing Pacific patrol boats under an Australian foreign aid program that supports our Pacific island neighbours to independently patrol and protect their economic exclusion zones. The project will bring vital jobs and prosperity to Tasmanian businesses and workers. We have Australia's best boat and ship builders and outfitters at our marine precinct in Hobart, and they are being betrayed and let down by lazy government members of parliament. Already, respected sources tell me that, in order to shore up Liberal seats in Western Australia, they are going to give the shipbuilding program to Austal, which is based, of course, in Western Australia. I am reliably told that this tendering process for the Pacific patrol boat project has become a farce because the political fix is in.

My message to this Liberal government is this: do not take your seats in Tasmania for granted. There is a business-friendly, conservative alternative to the Liberal party in Tasmania, and it is called the JLN, and it is coming. The JLN will support, come hell or high water, a fair go for our shipbuilding and manufacturing industry in Tasmania. This government will be punished at the ballot box if it does not give Tasmanian shipbuilders, outfitters and workers a fair go in the tendering process for defence shipbuilding.

It will be an absolute tragedy for Tasmania if we miss out on the Pacific Patrol Boat program, as there are no more naval programs for many years ahead that give Tasmania a chance to showcase itself as this program does. For heaven's sake! Tasmania's shipbuilders have already sold massive ships to the American military but have had a devil of a time just getting our own government to support them. What is the use in having a Leader of the Senate from Tasmania if he cannot deliver for his own state?

In closing, I want to thank the many hundreds of Australians who have contacted my office and shared their heart-wrenching stories about loved ones—sons, daughters and grandchildren—who had their lives destroyed by the drug ice. We have never seen a drug so highly addictive, cheap and freely available. As a nation we are faced with an extraordinary crisis, and the solution must be extraordinary. I will continue to work on my private member's bill which gives parents the right to involuntarily detox their children, but I know that that is not the answer alone. We must have the medical professionals to staff new rehabilitation centres, which will benefit from the new powers my private member's bill will give to parents and guardians. We must introduce new laws which target organised criminals and their assets on a coordinated national basis. As well as putting them in jail for selling drugs to our kids, we also need to have a look at taking the money that they have taken off our kids to give them drugs and investing it into our rehabilitation centres.