



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Iraq and Syria

SPEECH

Monday, 1 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Date Monday, 1 September 2014
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Questioner
Speaker Lambie, Sen Jacqui

Source Senate
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Senator LAMBIE (Tasmania—Deputy Leader and Deputy Whip of the Palmer United Party in the Senate) (17:31): Mr Deputy President, this is not my first speech. I acknowledge that the immediate fight in Iraq against these brutal, inhumane, bloody murderers will save innocent lives; however, what is the long-term strategy? Has the total costs of going to war been calculated or has the total cost of going to war been covered up? If past experience is anything to go by then it would appear that the government and Labor are charging into battle without a plan to properly care for the soldiers and their families—God prey—on their safe return. This is an issue that I have discussed at length with younger veterans. One wrote to me:

Is the Government prepared to factor into the cost of this latest operation the future ongoing expense—over the course of the lives of those that we are sending away to actively participate in this deployment on our behalf?

Will the Government be prepared to put this decision to the floor of parliament, in order to determine bipartisan support—so that the troops have no doubt in their minds future Governments will not backflip—in the decision to support this involvement—at the long term psychological expense of the participants—who win, lose or draw must live with the consequences of our decision from this day forward.

I also spoke to the Australian Defence Force Welfare Association about this issue last week. The Defence Force Welfare Association is made up of honourable men and women who were and are prepared to risk all to protect Australia and their brothers and sisters in arms. The Defence Force Welfare Association was formed in 1959 by a small group of serving and retired Australian Defence Force members from all services. They were frustrated by the fact that no organisation was properly protecting the interests of serving and former members of the ADF. Members of the DFWA are not radicals. They are proud Australians. They are thoughtful, measured and slow to anger and they have serious reservations about committing Australian military forces to further military operations in the Middle East without proper debate. Is this motion that has been sprung upon us proper debate? Today I give warning to this parliament that the men and women of the Defence Force Welfare Association are very angry. I share their anger because, just like the schoolyard

bully, this government and its members are deliberately picking on soft targets.

This government has failed to support the people our nation has sent into battle and harm's way in the past. Will the government automatically give gold cards to every troop placed in harm's way in combat or will they continue to force our veterans to fight for the best medical care our nation can offer? Will we have the situation where the new veterans created by this conflict say, 'I would rather face the Taliban or ISIS than face the DVA'?

This Liberal-National government have an appalling record of caring for our veterans. They cover up the suicide rate of our veterans because they are ashamed of the amount of young veterans killing themselves. The Liberal-National Party have chosen to take money away from Australian war widows and totally or permanently incapacitated former service personnel. According to the latest Defence Force Welfare Association's monthly magazine update, their reaction to Mr Abbott's veteran budget measures was 'incredulous disbelief'. The DFWA newsletter reads:

Foremost, disappointingly the budget had the effect of not only reducing the compensation payments of all disabled veterans but had a particularly severe likely impact on the most disabled, namely those who are on Special Rate or TPI Pensions. War Widows Pensions and those on Income Support Supplements were also affected.

What kind of person would take money away from war widows and those badly injured fighting Australia's enemies? I will tell you. The same kind of person who would salute the flag and shed a tear at an Anzac Day commemoration while taking a \$211 education bonus from the orphans of soldiers killed or badly wounded in battle. It is the same kind of person who would deliver a casual shrug and offer the comment 'shit happens' when learning of the death of another Australian digger in Afghanistan and then stare bizarrely at a TV reporter for 24 seconds when confronted with those comments and offer no apology. That is the sort of man I am talking about. That is the kind of person Australia today has as a leader. Until we have leaders who can live up to the Anzac legend and not off it, we are going nowhere fast as a country. I find it very hard to trust their decisions.

There are another five significant adverse budget measures that the Australian Defence Force Welfare Association has identified. Perhaps these should be fixed before we go sending any new troops into battle. They are: axing of the longstanding three-month backdating of the veterans disability pension claim; axing of the senior supplement of gold card holders who do not receive income support; axing of the federal government's share of an agreement with state governments to fund service pensioners concessions for travel, electricity, phone and council rates; withdrawing the provision to not count as income military superannuation when applying for a Commonwealth seniors card; and withdrawing of indexation on the clean energy supplement added to Veterans' Affairs pensions and payments, causing it to quickly lose real value over time.

This government is aware of the Australian Defence Force Welfare Association's concerns in regard to these outrages and now the government is aware of my anger and concerns. I have one message: fix it now before you commit any more troops to the battlefields. The spirit of our Vietnam veterans has been left behind in the fog. Will the spirit of those who have fought in the Middle East be left behind in the Desert Storm? That is the only question when it comes to looking after these men and women on return that you need to ask yourselves.