



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

BILLS

**Defence Legislation Amendment (Parliamentary
Approval of Overseas Service) Bill 2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 4 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Senator LAMBIE (Tasmania—Deputy Leader and Deputy Whip of the Palmer United Party in the Senate) (11:35): I rise to briefly speak to the Defence Legislation Amendment (Parliamentary Approval of Overseas Service) Bill 2014. I believe that the current system and process Australia has in place to make a decision to go to war is a flawed process and could be improved. I also believe that the people involved in making a decision on whether to go to war—the current executive—are not capable of making sound decisions. However, after consulting with people who have risked all and served their country in Iraq and Afghanistan, I believe the Greens proposition contained in this bill goes too far and places unnecessary constraints on the executive. I believe that the constraints on the executive proposed by the Greens, as written in this bill, go too far.

The executive needs to be empowered to continue to be able to make quick decisions and make quick deployments in order to properly protect national security. However, there has to be a point at which a military deployment or commitment is discussed and debated in the houses of parliament—perhaps in a joint sitting—in order to ensure that we always maintain mission relevance. And there should not be just one debate. After consulting with veterans, I believe that parliamentary debate should always occur at a point in time when the nature of the military operation significantly changes, for example, when it goes from a humanitarian action into a stabilisation phase or a war-fighting phase.

David Day, one of Australia's famous authors, has written a book called *The Politics of War: Australia at War 1939-45 from Churchill to Mac arthur*. It will benefit this debate if senators reflect on the words of David Day,

which put this debate into historical perspective and context. He wrote:

The outbreak of war therefore raised the question of how far Australia should go in supporting Britain against Germany where the military threat to Australia was limited, while a possibly imminent and very direct threat loomed large in the Pacific.

There was no question in the mind of the Australian prime minister, Robert Menzies, that when Britain was at war so too was Australia. As soon as he had heard Chamberlain's declaration of war on the radio, Menzies made his own sombre announcement of Australia's involvement. There was no triumphant flag-flying or the grandiose protestations of imperial loyalty that Australian leaders had used at the beginning of the First World War. The ravages of that war had removed any illusions Australians might have entertained about the nature of modern warfare. With the trenches of the First World War in mind, Menzies declared that it was his 'melancholy duty' to announce Australia's involvement as a simple consequence of Britain's involvement in events over which Australia had no control. After relating at some length for his radio audience the history of the dispute between Germany and its neighbours, Menzies beseeched 'God in his mercy and compassion' to deliver the world 'from this agony'.

Unlike Canada or South Africa, where the declaration of war was left to the respective parliaments to deliberate upon, Menzies was sufficiently confident to embroil Australia in the war as soon as he learnt of the British declaration. The British viceroy of India similarly plunged his charge into the distant struggle without reference to his subjects. According to Menzies, 'where Great Britain stands there stand the people of the entire British world'. When he was criticised for abandoning any semblance of Australian independence, he pointed to the popular sentiment for war, that the British people needed quick assurances of support and that the King's declaration of war automatically created a state of war between Australia and Germany. This last justification was the one that most determined Menzies' action. His legalistic background, combined with his sense of empire, could not conceive of the possibility of the King being at war in Britain but not in Australia. As it happened, the King remained monarch of neutral Ireland throughout the war and was not at war in South Africa and Canada until the parliaments of those dominions had met and decided to throw in their lot with Britain's.

The point I have taken from Mr Day's writing, which I believe to be true, is this: the current political system we have in order to determine whether we send our troops to war is not perfect and is flawed. History shows it can be improved. However the Greens' proposition on such an important issue is rushed and needs time for proper consideration. While the PUP and I will be voting against this bill, we will be open for discussion with all parties in the future in order to find a better system and procedures for determining how and when we go to war.

In closing, I would like to remind the chamber about the need for Australian governments to discuss and disclose to the Australian people the true cost of war. As one veteran quoted to me, 'The cost of war is much more than the cost of blankets and bullets.'

I renew my calls for a royal commission into the toxic leadership of our military, the cover-up of abuse and sexual assaults, and the dysfunction within the Department of Veterans' Affairs. We have sent our troops to war and failed to care for them after they have returned. The government cannot be allowed to get away with the cover-up of the veterans' suicide rate. I will not support the Greens' bill but will happily talk about amendments that provide a third path.