

**FAMILIES, HOUSING, COMMUNITY SERVICES AND INDIGENOUS
AFFAIRS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (FURTHER 2008
BUDGET AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2008**
Second Reading

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (7.14 p.m.)—I rise to speak to the [Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and Other Legislation Amendment \(Further 2008 Budget and Other Measures\) Bill 2008](#). Schedule 1 of the bill, the maternity immunisation allowance, clearly encourages parents to immunise their children and especially extends the allowance to cover children adopted overseas. Immunisation is important, and schedule 1 of the bill is clearly supported. Immunisation works to prevent disease, and the benefits clearly outweigh the risks. Immunisation is available against 23 diseases through the National Immunisation Program. Australians can be protected from diseases such as whooping cough, rubella, measles, hepatitis A, hepatitis B and even good old influenza. I am a supporter of immunising our communities. I congratulate the over 88 per cent of families who immunise their children. I know it is hard. I have a three-year-old and a one-year-old, and I take my children to get immunised. I took my poor little boy when he was six months old; his face went red and he let out that little squawk, but I understand how important it is.

Schedule 3 concerns child support. It is quite often said that imitation is the highest form of flattery, and the Rudd government demonstrates this again. Clearly, schedule 3 is supported. But it is schedule 2 that I have a significant problem with. This nation has a contract with its veterans. It is an unwritten contract—it is not spoken loudly in the halls of parliament or elsewhere, but it is a contract nonetheless—that says: ‘You will train, you will be led and you will fight. We will put you in harm’s way. Some of you will pay the ultimate price and will die. Because of that service, because you love country more than self, because you are not afraid to face this country’s adversaries and to fight for the freedom we take for granted, our contract with you is that we will have a range of entitlements that we will preserve.’ That is the contract with veterans.

In my military career and my time serving in operations overseas, if someone did not pull their weight or went back on their word, we said that they were ‘jack’—that they were a ‘jack man’. I stand here today and say to Mr Rudd, the Prime Minister, and to the government: you are a government of ‘jack men’—

Mr Bidgood—Outrageous!

Mr ROBERT—because you have stood and looked veterans in the eye and said, ‘We are going to strip your entitlements away.’ That government is ‘jack’ in my language and it is ‘jack’ in the language of our veterans. Last year, the government had the hide, the audacity, the blatant effrontery, to say to the veteran community in its 2007 election policy document, which I can only imagine now is a farcical piece of fairytale trash—and I will quote in case you are a little hard of hearing on that side—on page 5:

Labor understands the impact of rising costs of living and the importance of ensuring that entitlements do not erode in value.

Member for Dawson, are you a little hard of hearing, sir? Do I need to say it again for you?

Mr Bidgood interjecting—

Mr ROBERT—Your document, put out under the name of your leader, now the Prime Minister, said that entitlements will not erode in value. Today, your idea of ‘not eroding

in value' and that of the rest of the nation are slightly different indeed. Six months after you put out that fairytale and you conned the nation and you promised the veteran community and looked them in the eye, you produce a budget which has resulted in this piece of legislation that is increasing the pension age for partners of veterans from 50 to 58½.

Veterans' families plan their futures carefully. They take into account this contract that the government has with them, this unspoken agreement that entitlements will be there. Life in the military is hard. Veterans have to move city. They train. They spend extended periods of time away from loved ones. It is expected by veterans and, indeed, their partners that they will be safe in the knowledge that their government will look after them. These measures are in place to demonstrate a small part of our gratitude for those who fought for the freedom that we take for granted. Any measure to take them away is condemning these families, in some small part, to further stress and hardship. I find it appalling that this government would look veterans in the eye through their pre-election policy document and boast about protecting entitlements and, in the same breath, strip them away.

On 14 May, I stood in the House to express my abject disgust with this government for considering policy that would exempt veterans from claiming entitlements. For almost three months now, the government has denied the issues and has finally backflipped on taking away all partner pensions from 50 to 58½. It has changed it now so that the partner of a veteran who is in receipt of the equivalent of or less than special rate but above general rate, who has at least 80 impairment points under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act—partners of veterans affected by these measures are those where the veteran is in receipt of a general rate disability, extreme disablement, intermediate rate disability or temporary special rate—are provided for. Whilst I welcome the backflip, I am still appalled that the government has not moved to change the other \$113 million it is ripping out by cancelling the partner pension if a partner separates from a veteran within 12 months.

I have spoken in this place before about the important role of the partners of service men and women. They are left to hold the family fabric together, sometimes for great periods of time—for World War II veterans, in many cases, it was up to five years. For anyone to look a veteran or their partner in the eye and take away their rights is abhorrent. The families and partners of service men and women have made enormous sacrifices for this country. Families are required to move constantly around the nation. Service men and women are constantly sent overseas. Veterans often come back with a range of disorders, both physical and mental. Punishing veterans and their families by removing the pension of the spouse or partner of a veteran after they have separated for 12 months to save \$113 million is woeful. It is the act of a 'jack man'. It is the act of someone who looks you in the eye and says, 'I will be there,' but you know damn well that, when the bullets start firing, they will be nowhere to be seen.

This government is running on a two-year surplus of \$40 billion, thanks to the outstanding work of the member for Higgins and the previous Howard government. This government should be thankful for the previous government's fiscally responsible management. The previous government worked tirelessly to put Australia in good economic standing. This government seems to think that the opportunistic seizing of veterans entitlements equates to not eroding the value of veterans entitlements. I think veterans would rather this government looked them in the eye and said, 'Thank you very much for your service; we are going to preserve your entitlements—all those things that you knew would be there when you served and sacrificed for your nation.' I would rather the government just said, 'Thank you for preserving the freedom that I live under each day.' I would rather this government said to the partners and families of veterans,

'Thank you for allowing your husbands, your wives, your sons and your daughters to go and serve and fight in our name to protect our freedoms.'

I would rather the government actually honoured their election commitments. Could you imagine that? I would rather they honoured their election commitment which said, 'Labor understands the impact of rising costs of living and the importance of ensuring that entitlements do not erode in value.' I would rather the government just did the right thing. But, no, they have not. After looking veterans in the eye, they have moved to punitive measures to take away entitlements.

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs further promised to convene a council. The purpose of the council was to 'give Australia's veterans and ex-service organisations a voice at the highest level of government and a greater say with decision makers'. For the last 10 months, while this council has not existed, I have heard the pleas of veterans and their families—and that has not been through a council. Clearly, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs has other things to do—for example, calling the coalition's move to increase the base pension by \$30 a week 'a stunt'. Obviously that is far more important than setting up a council—which he promised to do—to more clearly hear the views of veterans. I can only assume that the reason that this minister has not gone forth and set up this council, as he promised to do, is that his level of concern is perhaps not as high as he verbalises in the House—but, then again, a mere six months after they broke their election promise so flagrantly and so egregiously, it is no wonder.

The veteran community have been screaming for assistance, but clearly their pleas are falling on deaf ears—and they can only fall on deaf ears if the minister and the government are not listening. But, then again, if they cannot even keep a simple election promise within six months, I suppose listening would not help anyway. If veterans cannot express their concerns and needs directly to their member of parliament or the minister then there is more wrong with this government than their pleas falling on deaf ears.

The Rudd Labor government went to the election giving veterans and their families a misguided impression of where they stood on veterans entitlements. Veterans have been duped by this government. They have been given the impression that they will not be worse off under this government—yet, clearly, they are now \$113 million worse off. There is no way for your hollow men to spin that. The budget figures are patently clear. They are \$113 million worse off.

What do you say to a partner of a veteran who has come back with a range of disorders and whose marriage cannot continue to work because of a range of issues but who has been with the veteran for 20 or 25 years, caring for him? What do you say to a partner who, every day, goes and meets with her previous husband, caring for him and taking care of his needs, but cannot live in the same house and they are now separated? Suddenly, after 12 months, you are going to rip away the pension from that partner. You are going to look that partner in the eye and say, 'I know you care daily for the needs of the veteran and I know you have been together for so long and that, due to a range of post-traumatic disorders and other conditions, you cannot continue to live together and you are separated, but we are going to take your pension away.' Are you kidding me? Have the hollow men infected the front bench so much that your empathy and degree of understanding of what is right and what is wrong have become shallower as a consequence? Every veteran in this great country of ours who voted for this government has an absolute right to feel a great deal of misapprehension, to feel like they have been duded.

The coalition has always supported the veteran community and strongly believes that the veteran community should be exempt from a range of budgetary cuts. We have a

contract with our veterans that says, 'We put you in harm's way and we will preserve your entitlements.' The sacrifices that veterans have made have not lessened over time. What they have done on the battlefield and the operational fronts across the theatres of war has not lessened over time. The sacrifices that partners have made on behalf of their veteran spouses have not lessened over time. What partners of veterans have done since their veteran partner came home has not lessened over time. The post-traumatic stress disorders and other illnesses that our veterans suffer have not lessened over time. The community's high regard for our veterans has not lessened. The great resolve of the community has not lessened.

But, clearly, the way this government views veterans has lessened. The government's view of this unwritten contract that 'if you go in harm's way, we'll take care of you' has lessened. Clearly, this government's view of the sacrifice that veterans have made overseas and the value of that to the freedom that we hold has lessened, and that is sad. That is a great tragedy for this House to face. The saddest part of all this is that Labor is not only eroding the value of veterans entitlements with the legislative changes I have spoken about but also eroding the value of our veterans' commitment to this country. Veterans would say: 'You promised that you would not erode the value of veterans entitlements. That was your promise to the veteran community, and within six months your budget is ripping \$113 million out of the veteran community.' In the language of the military, that is a 'jack act'. You are simply a bunch of 'jack men' and should stand condemned.