

VETERANS' AFFAIRS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2008

Second Reading

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (6.07 p.m.)—I was intending to rise to support the [Veterans' Affairs Legislation Amendment \(International Agreements and Other Measures\) Bill 2008](#) on the premise that this was a incontestable bill, that it would slide quietly and easily through the Main Committee, until a caucus-in-confidence document that was slipped to the shadow minister for veterans affairs was presented to me. Let me speak on behalf of the veterans community, not only as a member of the opposition but as someone with an Australian Service Medal who is indeed a veteran. The veteran community has a very special place in our hearts. They are special not for any one reason but for a whole host of different and unique reasons that many people who have not walked the path may not understand. Veterans joined, trained, served, endured, fought and many times suffered whilst we, the recipients of their service, enjoyed the benefits—notably, freedom.

Veterans in many parts know the cruel injustices of conflict, war and military operations, including peacekeeping, peacemaking and peace-enforcing. They know the consequences on the field of operations, and with loved ones at home they are separated from, yet they serve regardless. Many of them serve in places of great fear, knowing full well that courage is just fear hanging on a minute longer—a place of bullets and bombs, and indeed biscuits and tins, of unhygienic conditions, of living in tents, of outdoors, of night operations, of difficult terrain and different weather. It is not just that they are tremendously brave and self-sacrificing; it is that they care so much more about their country than at times about themselves.

In such an environment I find it incredibly difficult to be faced with the prospect of reading the caucus-in-confidence document, which makes it very clear that every member of the government knew that in this supposedly uncontentious bill was hidden a change. For any reservist or part-time soldier who was injured and received compensation, rather than that compensation being worked out at a normal five-day week, it will now be pro rata, based on their previous service. And the example given in the caucus-in-confidence document made it very clear that, if a veteran or a reserve veteran was injured in conflict or in operations but was only doing four days a week, they would get four-fifths of the compensation payout.

What is even more appalling is that the caucus-in-confidence document made the point that savings will be small but are likely to be around \$25,000. That is a saving of \$25,000 taken from an injured digger—\$25,000 taken because you want an injured reserve soldier to not receive compensation for five days a week; you want to pro-rata it down to what they served. When this particularly heinous bill passes, it will create an environment where some veterans will be on one measure and others will be on a different measure. Veterans affairs compensation—veterans pensions and payments—is not welfare, as those who have had the courage to put on a uniform and serve know full well. To hide in this bill a saving of \$25,000 to punish a part-time veteran who is injured is an absolute and utter disgrace. Compounding the disgrace are two measures we saw in the budget: increasing the pension age for a partner from 50 to 58½, to save \$33 million, and ensuring that the ex-partner of a veteran receives a pension for only 12 months following their separation, to save \$77 million—\$110 million ripped out of the very people who fought to give you the freedom to stand up and make a law in this place.

On top of that, we go down to the pecuniary depths of ripping out \$25,000 of a range of veterans by pro-rata-ing what a reservist would receive if they were injured. I was to give a speech regarding the changes to this legislation and what was going through; I suggest that the speech is worthless in the face of what this government is trying to do. I make it my personal pledge, working in consultation with the other members of the opposition and indeed the shadow spokesman for veterans affairs, to ensure that every veteran in this country knows how this was snuck through, how the caucus-in-confidence document shows every member of the government knew about it, how the minister did not cover it in the second reading speech and how this government snuck it into this chamber within an 'uncontroversial' bill. It is an absolute and utter disgrace. How dare you do that to people who had the courage to fight for you! You should be ashamed to be in the House this day. I am ashamed to be finding out through the back door about changes of legislation in this way. I thought the government was better than this.