



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Australian Defence Force

SPEECH

Tuesday, 30 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 30 September 2014
Page 88
Questioner
Speaker McGrath, Sen James

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator McGRATH (Queensland) (20:53): I rise to speak about an important issue. It is an issue that I flagged in my first speech to this chamber some three months ago and one that I would like to reiterate here tonight. That is, the need for an Australian Defence covenant. The Australian Defence Force is an institution like no other. It is an institution built upon and maintained by honour, courage, integrity and mateship. It is an institution that serves as the backbone of our society and embodies the fair go egalitarian attitude that makes Australia the place it is today. John Key believes New Zealand to be the best little country in the world. I think Australia is the best middle country in the world.

We are well-served by our Australian Defence Force, which comprises of three elements. The first is the Australian Army, which was founded in 1901 and is regarded as one of the finest armies anywhere in the world. I should declare that my dad, Bruce, was a pilot in the Army, his father served in the Second World War and his father's father served in the First World War, also in the Army. The second is the Australian Navy, which was founded in 1911 and is currently the third largest navy in the southern hemisphere. The third is the Royal Australian Air Force, which was founded shortly after the First World War and is the second-oldest independent air force in the world. Today, there are more than 83,000 men and women serving in a regular or reservist capacity within our three distinguished services.

George Orwell once said:

We sleep soundly in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm.

Today, in 21st century Australia, we can say proudly that we are indebted to the brave men and women who protect us while we sleep and the brave men and women who, each day, safeguard our way of life by laying their lives on the line. There is no higher form of public service.

In the past few years alone, the Australian Defence Force has led a multinational humanitarian task force in East Timor, brought about political stability in the Solomon Islands, fought militant jihadists in Afghanistan, helped removed a dictator in Iraq and

protected the integrity of our national borders—not to mention numerous peace-keeping missions. We must not forget the great assistance that the Australian Defence Force provides in responding to natural disasters across the country. The ADF played an integral role during the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires, during the Queensland floods and also during the recent Cyclone Yasi. Through the generations—at home and abroad; across land, sea and air—these men and women have served this nation valiantly.

While one can only applaud the growing respect and admiration that the Australian people have for our men and women in uniform, especially on Anzac day, it is important that we honour their unique sacrifice on the other 364 days of the year. Indeed, I would like to share with the members of this chamber a poem written by Siegfried Sassoon that I think perfectly captures this sentiment:

I knew a simple soldier boy
 Who grinned at life in empty joy,
 Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
 And whistled early with the lark.
 In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
 With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
 He put a bullet through his brain.
 No one spoke of him again.
 You snug-faced crowds with kindling eye
 Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
 Sneak home and pray you'll never know
 The hell where youth and laughter go.

While I am certain that everyone in this chamber is conscious of the threats to life and limb that our men and women in uniform face, what is less apparent are the smaller sacrifices that they and their families make every day. I am talking now of those who miss the birth of their first child while serving overseas, of those who hold their family together while their partners fight

foreign lands and of those children who are forced to change schools and leave their friends every few years so that their parents can continue to serve our country.

To recognise this extraordinary group of Australians and to honour their sacrifices, great and small, it my belief that we require an Australian Defence covenant. Such a covenant would act as a charter of rights for serving, discharged and retired members of the Australian Defence Force and their families. It would be predicated upon the notion that the entire country has a moral obligation to the men and women—and their families—who serve and have served in its armed forces. In effect, the covenant would be a contract between the Australian people and the Defence community.

I must confess that this idea is not mine nor is it new. I draw inspiration from the UK's defence covenant; which was implemented several years ago.

The two fundamental principles of the UK's defence covenant are as follows:

the armed forces community should not face disadvantage compared to other citizens in the provision of public and commercial services; and

special consideration is appropriate in some cases, especially for those who have given most such as the injured and the bereaved

In part, the Australian covenant would be based upon the UK defence covenant; but it would be designed to reflect the nature of Defence service in Australia, as well as give voice to the unique nature of the contribution made by the men and women of the Australian Defence Force.

I am aware of the great work being done by various ex-service organizations in Australia who have identified the need to better recognise the service of Australians in our Defence forces. I have initiated communications with some of these organisations, especially those based in Queensland, with the objective of understanding their perspective and their objectives. I thank to Graeme Mickelberg for his assistance in that regard. If I have missed a group, I would ask that they contact my office in Nambour.

It is my hope that all federal political parties, including my own, will subsequently incorporate the concept and principles of the Australian Defence covenant within their respective legislative agendas. It is high time that we gave back to this extraordinary group of Australians.