

## VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (2007 ELECTION COMMITMENTS) BILL 2008 – 14<sup>th</sup> May 2008

**Mrs VALE** (Hughes) (11:48 AM) —Like all legislation relating to veterans and their families, the [Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment \(2007 Election Commitments\) Bill 2008](#) is of particular interest to the electorate of Hughes. Like so many other electorates across the country, I have many constituents who are part of the significant ex-service community.

This bill is about looking after those in the veterans community and their families; hence, I am pleased to be able to speak on this bill and overall I do support it. The purpose of the Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (2007 Election Commitments) Bill 2008 is to extend the income support supplement to war widows or widowers who are under the qualifying age. While I do support this bill, I must say that I am confused about some of the measures in last night's budget because, strangely, the government has actually raised the age of service pension eligibility for veterans service partners from 50 years to 58 years. This is for female partners. This is a confusing initiative, given that the purpose of this particular bill is to actually be of assistance to families of veterans. But I would like to say a little more about that later.

This bill provides measures that remove the requirements for war widows and widowers under the qualifying age to have a dependent child, be permanently incapacitated or be the partner of a person receiving an income support pension, before they can receive the income support supplement. The bill will also extend to certain single disability pension recipients the disability pension bereavement payment. Under this measure, the bereavement payment will be extended to cover single recipients of the special rate and extreme disablement adjustment disability pension who die in impoverished circumstances. This bill will also extend the automatic grant of war widow or war widower or orphaned pensions to the widows, widowers and eligible children of veterans and members who immediately before the death of their veteran relative were in receipt of the temporary special rate or intermediate rate disability pension.

To make this legislation as effective as possible on a national level, I respectfully suggest that the federal government give favourable consideration to the following points. The Minister for Veterans' Affairs issued a media release in recent months describing the veterans' entitlements legislation amendment bill as a fairer indexation system that would result in a range of additional payments delivering up to \$1,045 more per year for Department of Veterans' Affairs war widows, widowers and disability pensioners. The minister said that these payments and new indexation methods maintain and improve the value of veterans and war widows pensions and protect them from future erosion. Only in the last days had the previous government acted. They failed to recognise the erosion of veterans' pensions until they were forced to do so. He said that the Rudd government is committed to providing increased and fairer financial support for members of the veteran community and this package delivers a key election promise. However, the general rate disability pensions will for the first time be indexed with reference to both the consumer price index and the male total average weekly earnings, which is fair enough.

Alongside the improved indexation calculations, the base rate of all pensions on the general rate will increase by five per cent. For example, 100 per cent general rate recipients will receive an extra \$22 a fortnight, which will be very welcome. Extreme disability adjustment pensioners will receive an extra \$15 to their base rate on top of the indexation increase, resulting in an additional \$40.20 a fortnight. The war widows pension will increase by \$19.70 to \$582.40 a fortnight; the single service pension by \$9.10 to \$546.80 a fortnight; and the married couples rate by \$7.70 to \$456.80 per person per fortnight. The wholly dependent partners death benefit and special rate disability pension under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004 have also increased in line with the latest increases under the Veterans' Entitlements Act. The new pension rates come into effect on 20 March and were first paid on 27 March 2008. These increases are in addition to the increased utilities and telephone allowances paid to eligible veterans and war widows.

The coalition during the last federal election committed to increasing the utilities allowance and seniors concessional allowance to \$500 for those people receiving the age pension, mature age allowance, partner allowance, widow allowance, service pension, veterans income support supplement, carers payment, disability support pension or DVA invalidity service pension, and for holders of the Commonwealth seniors health card, through the More Support for Pensioners, Self-Funded Retirees and People with Disabilities and their Carers policy. This was announced by the coalition on 23 October 2007.

This announcement was followed by Labor announcing on 1 November 2007 their copycat policy, Making Ends Meet: Federal Labor Plans for Older Australians and People with Disabilities and Carers, which largely mirrored the coalition policy. Having said that, Mr Deputy Speaker, I do acknowledge that generally speaking there has been bipartisan support for this very venerable and venerated policy area of our government. If the coalition had not announced this policy during the last election campaign, would Australian veterans be worse off? Labor would not have brought this legislation into the parliament. One must say that this is another example of Labor me-tooing coalition policy, as was often done in the last election campaign. However, this is one that I will not, and the veterans certainly would not, complain about.

What the coalition did not do was refuse to give the veterans community certainty by leaving them in limbo regarding the carers bonus. The Rudd Labor government were elected on the basis of protecting working families and Australia's most vulnerable, yet they appear ambivalent to carers and their families. This bill continues to show ambivalence to veterans by the Labor government, as it appears that, while they have given with one hand, they actually have taken away with the other.

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs used the introduction of this bill to detract from the carers bonus and the deeming issues that were relevant to a large number of veterans. This bill is totally silent on the carers bonus. It fails to reassure the veterans community of the continuation of the bonus, which the coalition implemented.

Deeming is the other issue about which the minister continues to remain silent. The deeming rate increased on 20 March 2008 by 0.5 per cent. While this portfolio has always been marked by bipartisan support on most measures in the past, the Whitlam and the Hawke and Keating governments made insensitive cuts into the Department of Veterans' Affairs budget. Between the years 1996 and 2007, the coalition government delivered for veterans in many and various meaningful ways. Initiatives included the gold card. The government announced on 27 April 1998 the extension of eligibility for the veterans gold card to all World War II veterans, being those who had run the risk of being exposed to danger from hostile fire and who were then aged 70 or more. The initiative commenced on 1 January 1999, 54 years after the end of World War II. The government estimated that this initiative would provide a gold card to an initial 50,000 veterans at a cost of \$508 million over four years.

The veterans home care was another initiative established by the coalition government in 2001 to provide widows and widowers with low-care needs to maintain their homes and to be able to remain in their homes longer. This program provided for services, domestic assistance, personal care, safety related home and garden maintenance and respite care. Services are allocated on a needs basis to holders of the gold and the white cards.

The accreditation of aged care facilities was introduced also by the coalition in support of our veterans who had to use that particular service. The first accreditation had been undertaken and been successful by 1 January 2001. In 2007-08, the coalition government provided funding of \$21 million over four years to ensure that veterans with a gold or white repatriation healthcare card could access appropriate healthcare and support services on discharge from hospital, benefiting some 3,500 veterans and war widows a year.

In 2001-02, we reinstated the war widows pension to those widows who lost their pensions prior to 1984 on remarriage. War widows and widowers now have an additional three months to claim their war widows pension after the death of a spouse. In 2007, we provided funding of \$57.2 million to make ex gratia payments of \$25,000 each to Australians held as prisoners of war in Europe or their surviving spouses. The coalition provided a similar payment in 2001 for those held by the Japanese and in 2003 for those held by North Korean forces.

The coalition government has in the past been and will continue in the future to be committed to putting our veterans and their families and their needs first, and committed to supporting veterans and families who have dedicated their lives to serving our nation and thus ensuring the freedoms that we enjoy today.

Yet on the eve of Anzac Day, just weeks ago, the Rudd government displayed an insensitivity to the needs of Australian diggers and their families. The announcement by the Minister for Veterans' Affairs of negotiations to place care and support needs of younger ex-service men and women with a disability into the Commonwealth state/territory disability agreement was a positive move, but it shows how out of touch and insensitive to the needs of the veteran community the government can be, because Labor do need to explain why they are moving some young veterans with a

disability—ex-service men and women—to a state government system where one size fits all. The coalition recognises that individual care plans are needed for any veteran who has a clinical condition. One size does not fit all and veterans need to be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Our veterans have fought under our national flag and it is the nation's responsibility to care for them, not the state. The federal Labor government needs to listen and consult widely with the veteran community before making any such decisions so relevant to their personal care. The opposition remains committed to ensuring that veterans' needs are tailored to veterans and are delivered through the veterans' affairs program and not delivered as part of a general social security and welfare system by state governments.

This bill, while it is a positive step in the right direction, is overshadowed by last night's announcement that the Rudd government is increasing the age of service pension eligibility for veteran service partners from 50 to 58.5 years for women. As I have said, it seems to be in total conflict with the objectives of this particular bill in making available greater eligibility for people in that position. By suddenly raising the eligibility age, the government is condemning our veterans families to financial stress and hardship and great uncertainty. The Rudd government is giving to veterans on one hand, through the introduction of this important bill, and taking away with the other by lifting the eligibility age for veteran service partners. As I said, given the objectives of this bill, it is confusing and difficult to understand why such a measure was made and provided for in the current budget.

And when one also looks at the fact that there is a \$21.7 billion surplus, one wonders why there is a need to put such an imposition upon veterans families. We can afford to care well for our veterans and we can support their partners and we must be very mindful that the partners of veterans have served and supported our country just like they have supported their veterans. Many of them have raised families while their husbands or partners have been sent overseas, sometimes on short notice, for months on end. Indeed, in previous conflicts many of those service partners were alone for years on end. They have indeed served our country. With a \$21.7 billion surplus, it seems mean-spirited to me that we have taken away that kind of support. To raise the age of eligibility for veteran service partners from 50 to 58.5 years for women seems to be mean-spirited in the context of the wealth of this nation. We can do better for veterans and their families and, with these caveats, I do support the bill.

However, before I finish, I would like to acknowledge the veterans across Australia who participated recently in the 40th anniversary of the battle of Fire Support Base Coral and Balmoral, as well as acknowledge all those who took part in that very significant battle in the Vietnam War. I particularly acknowledge 1RAR and 3RAR. The 3rd Royal Australian Regiment are in my electorate, at Holsworthy. They are known as 'Old Faithful', which is a wonderful name they have gained due to their reputation for delivering the impossible. I am very proud to have met many of them at the function that was held by the government in the main hall on Monday evening. I wish to commend and thank them all for the service they have given to their country. Even while we have a very significant and generous budget that provides for veterans and their families, I think the very best that we can do for them is to try to be the very best Australian citizens we can be in their honour and in reflection of their personal sacrifice. I commend this bill to the House.