



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
ADJOURNMENT

Veterans

SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Speaker Bartlett, Sen Andrew	Question No.

Senator BARTLETT (Queensland) (19:40): I rise to speak tonight about the importance of recognising our veterans and all those who put their lives on the line fighting at the behest of the Australian government in conflicts around the world. The Greens and I and many others in the community often oppose the wars that our government chooses to send our soldiers to. We certainly oppose this government's spending of billions of dollars of taxpayers' money to expand Australia's role as a global arms trader but we—and I think all Australians, frankly, across the board—do want to see those people who are part of those conflicts from Australia when they do return here being properly cared for. If we look at the large amounts of money that are spent on commemorations and memorials, we can look at how much better it would be for those that are still alive today if they got better support and a better deal from the Department of Veterans' Affairs in many cases.

I wanted to also explicitly draw attention to the many people who supported and, indeed, saved the lives of Australian service personnel in the conflicts of Iraq and Afghanistan who were originally from those lands and who acted as interpreters. Whilst I have never been part of such battlefields, of course, I don't think it takes much imagination to recognise that such work was very dangerous and made those people even more of a target in their own homelands. It is to be commended that this government and previous governments have brought a number of people who served as interpreters assisting Australian Defence personnel in Afghanistan and Iraq here to Australia and I acknowledge that effort, but I do believe we have an ongoing obligation to those people once they have come here.

I would like to call on the still relatively new Minister for Veterans Affairs, Mr Chester, to look at the case of these people who served as translators, who clearly were in perilous, dangerous and traumatic situations because they were removed from their homeland with their families at very short notice, taken away from there—many of them never to return—and settled here. I think most are now Australian citizens. It is great we have given that opportunity to them. But many of them, not surprisingly, have ongoing health issues, particularly with trauma and stress, and they are not getting access to the same sort of treatment that we would expect our former Defence personnel to receive. I am sure, and in fact I know—because I have seen the correspondence from past attempts at advocacy for these people to get proper support and assistance through the normal Veterans' Affairs mechanisms—that they were given all of the technicalities in the world as to why they weren't officially Australian Defence Force personnel. Some were under the command of the UK or the US and maybe, in terms of the actual wording of the rules and regulations, that is true. But I would ask the government and the minister to re-examine and change those rules and regulations so these people can get assistance and support.

I understand we are talking about perhaps 600 people around Australia. There is a group of at least 60 of them from Iraq who are living in Queensland at the moment, and I met with about a dozen of them at the Darra RSL in Brisbane a few months back. These are people that march on Anzac Day. These are people who are supported by the RSL there locally and recognised as returned service personnel who supported Australia in the theatre of war. I join with the calls of the RSL in Queensland for the government to consider providing proper help and support to these men. I wrote to the new minister back in March, calling on him to look at this situation again with fresh eyes, and I urge him once again to do so and to hear the support from so many Australian Defence personnel, who realise the role that these people play.

Alongside that, I also join with Captain Jason Scanes, who lives in Maryborough now, who has continued to campaign for five years for his interpreter from Afghanistan to get protection. He is one who hasn't been able to get protection from the Australian government. I know the minister has said he will review that case. I would urge him to do so as promptly as possible and get that person to a place of safety here in Australia forthwith.