

Senate debates

Wednesday, 3 February 2010

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Matters of Public Interest Veterans Affairs

[All Senate debates on 3 Feb 2010](#) < [Previous debate](#) [Next debate](#) >

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David Johnston (WA, Liberal Party, Shadow Minister for Defence) [Share this](#) | [Link to this](#) | [Hansard source](#)

Today I would like to address an important issue for the coalition, the opposition. It is particularly important for me and my opposition colleagues engaged in defence portfolios. I pause to commend the member for Greenway for the outstanding work in the engagement of veterans that she has undertaken whilst shadow minister for veterans affairs. [Louise Markus](#), [Bob Baldwin](#), [Stuart Robert](#) and I are determined and committed to the cause of equity for veterans and the ex-service community generally.

Australian veterans have been the subject of a very cruel deception by the Rudd government and by the current Minister for Veterans' Affairs. Former members of the [Australian Defence Force](#) are of course icons within our communities and have given great service to our country—loyal service and, I might say, service which was acknowledged and very well expressed by our current Prime Minister in the [Australian Labor Party's](#) election 2007 policy document, when he said, at page 3:

There is perhaps no greater duty that we as a nation and as a parliament have than to honour, remember and express our gratitude to those Australians who have served in the defence of our nation ...

Those are very fine words. I now understand, as do many veterans, that when it comes to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs it is foolish to judge them and rely upon them based upon what they have said. They must, however, be judged by what they do.

Further within the policy document of 2007 it states:

A Rudd Labor Government will provide a fresh approach to veteran's affairs, and a fresh leadership team, which is dedicated to working in partnership with the

ex-service community on the issues that concern them. Labor will work hard to achieve six goals for veterans ...

And the six goals were enumerated. The first was:

To restore the value of compensation and prevent further erosion due to unfair indexation.

That was on page 3. This statement is a categorical rolled-gold promise to veterans that Labor would make positive changes to the value of their compensation and protect it from inflation and diminution from inadequate indexation.

The promises continue throughout the document. On page 5 it states:

A key concern within the veteran community is the impact of rising costs of living, and the erosion of their entitlements over time due to unfair indexation arrangements under the [Howard Government](#).

On page 5, it further states:

To help combat this, Labor committed to index all disability pensions and the domestic component of the War Widow's Pension to movements in the [Consumer Price Index \(CPI\)](#) or Male Total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE), whichever is the greater.

Further to this, in two press releases on 6 and 7 May 2007 the then Rudd opposition left no doubt as to their intention and promises. I have the document containing the joint statement of Kevin Rudd MP, federal Labor leader, and Alan Griffin MP, shadow minister for veterans' affairs. In that document they say:

A Rudd Labor government will restore the value of the Special Rate Disability Pension ([TPI](#) and [TTI](#)), Intermediate Rate and the Extreme Disablement Adjustment Pensions by indexing the whole of these pensions to movements in Male Total Average Weekly Earning (MTAWE) or the Consumer Price Index (CPI), whichever is greater.

In a separate press release on 7 May Alan Griffin said:

A Federal Labor government will restore the value of the Special Rate Disability Pension (TPI and TTI), Intermediate Rate and the Extreme Disability Adjustment Pensions by indexing the whole of these pensions to movements in Male Total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE) or the Consumer Price Index (CPI), whichever is the greater.

So there is the encouragement.

When in opposition, the now minister criticised the Howard government for failing to release the **military superannuation** review. In a press release on 6 September he attacked Minister Billson. He said:

It is understood that Minister Billson has had the report since July 2007. He has since ignored calls from the ex-service community and Labor to release the report for public consideration.

*This review will provide vital information for former and current defence personnel regarding the operation of the **military superannuation** system and how it can be improved. They are entitled to know what the review says and what the government will do about it. Instead, the government is sitting on the report.*

He went on to say:

*There are a number of outstanding issues relating to **military superannuation**, including, the indexation method for defence superannuation pensions ...*

And so it went on.

The point about this is that these various complaints—he made another one on 8 October—similarly complain of the delay. The delay was in fact some 10 months, which included an election and caretaker period. Minister Griffin commissioned the Matthews review of pension indexation arrangements in Australia. The minister, the same one who had attacked the Howard government for delay, sat on this report for some eight months without releasing it. The point about this is that, when in opposition, it is all very well to say these things to people—people on fixed incomes and people with disabilities, as veterans—and tell them you are going to do something about it when you are elected. You sucker them for their vote. It is absolutely no surprise that the Rudd government has reneged on these promises and postures. This has been one of the most cruel and callous betrayals of veterans in the history of public affairs in this country.

[Mr Tanner](#), in fact, delivered the news. In his press release he said:

*The Rudd Government is satisfied, after considering Mr Matthews' report, the purpose of indexation of civilian and **military superannuation** pensions should continue to maintain the purchasing power of the pension.*

He continued:

... we are satisfied that the CPI is the most suitable index to protect [Australian Government](#) superannuation pensions against inflationary price increases available at this time.

There is the slap in the face. Having promised them the sun and the moon, Mr Tanner says, 'Sorry boys, we are not giving you a cracker.'

My allegation is of a serious breach of faith and trust by the Prime Minister and the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, and this is supported by four members of the government. Indeed, they wrote to Mr Tanner disclosing their disappointment. I propose to table this document and the response from Mr Tanner. The members of the government were [Mike Kelly](#), the member for Eden-Monaro, [Bob McMullan](#), the member for Fraser, [Kate Lundy](#), a senator for the [ACT](#), and [Annette Ellis](#), the member for Canberra. In this document these four members, having seen the Matthews report and the response to it, say to Mr Tanner that they were shocked—as shocked as veterans are, I would say, because that is what jumps out from the pages of this document. The document states:

Understandably, there is a huge disappointment in both the findings and the government response announced on the same day. It had been widely expected that the recommendations would have supported a change to the method of indexation of these pensions to that of which is high, MTAW or CPI, consistent with the pension, following the earlier Senate and other inquiries.

It further states:

Significantly, many people genuinely believe that prior to the 2007 election the [ALP](#) had committed to determining a fairer method of indexation, and a review would provide the direction. So the immediate acceptance of the recommendation of no change in government response is being seen as a reversal of the pre-election position espoused by the ALP in the campaign material.

These are not my words. These are the words of two parliamentary secretaries, a senator and the member for Canberra getting stuck into their minister for suckering the veterans community into believing that they were honest and straight up with them when they made these promises. The document continues on from there.

I seek leave to table the letter from Kelly, McMullan, Lundy and Ellis and the reply by the Hon. [Lindsay Tanner](#).

Leave granted.

Their deceiving veterans does not end there. On 12 September 2008 Treasurer Swan said on ABC radio in Brisbane that the [DVA](#) disability pension would be included in the Harmer review. Again, I say that it is no surprise that the disability pensions were not ultimately included in that review. Bluntly, where do

these people get off making reckless statements to people on fixed incomes and disability pensions only to contemptuously fail to deliver?

What has the minister and the Rudd government actually done for veterans and their families? They have provided a massive amount of paper shuffling for lawyers, mates and academics. The government has commissioned, firstly, a review of advocacy services; secondly, a review of military compensation; thirdly, a review of [Gulf War](#) syndrome; fourthly, a review of the Clarke review—that is a nice one: a review of a review! Fifthly, the government has commissioned a review of mental health care in the ADF and beyond—the Dunk report; sixthly, an inquiry into the F111 deseal/reseal issue; seventhly, the Timor-Leste family study; and, lastly, the Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on ex-service matters with inquiries held in each capital city. So there has been this magnificent, sensational series of laser and light shows designed to make the Rudd government look interested in veterans affairs. The truth is completely and utterly the opposite. Veterans and their families have been fobbed off, deceived, misled and suckered for their vote.

This is the government which has taken Australia from a position of having \$20 billion in the bank to a deficit of \$48 billion this year. Almost \$70,000 million has been expended in a little over two years on a \$900 payment to all and sundry. School halls have been provided to schools that do not need them. Pink batts are available to every uninsulated house—and we know how well that is running. There are laptop computers and trips to Bali and Copenhagen for all and sundry, and bureaucrats and advisers—and not a cracker for veterans. We still have the \$43 billion Australian Broadband Network to come, with no business plan.

Mr Tanner and Mr Rudd and Mr Griffin say that living up to the promises they gave will be too expensive. They are happy to spend everybody else's money on everything else, including themselves. This is nothing more or less than a glib con and a betrayal of the legitimate expectations, as fuelled by the Prime Minister, of all veterans. This callous treatment of veterans fits squarely with a number of misrepresentations made before the 2007 election: 'I'm a fiscal conservative,' 'I'm an economic conservative,' and 'We will take the Japanese whalers to the [International Court](#) of Justice.' These were of the same ilk—representations with not a shred of intent to live up to them.

The message that I have for veterans today is that, whilst you may not have been entirely happy with the Howard government, you were not openly and cruelly deceived. You were not treated as some electoral doormat, as some

gullible mob of innocent believers and victims, to be abused and suckered. We did not do that, and we will not do that.

Given the deficit and the level of borrowings of this government, it must be said that meeting the equitable resolutions that veterans seek in the reform of their entitlements indexes is now further than ever from becoming a reality. It has disappeared over the hill in the deficit style of reckless spending of this completely profligate Rudd government. The Rudd government has in fact spent all of the money—and not a cracker for veterans. My commitment and that of my colleagues is to relentlessly argue the case for these amendments if elected to government, when we would have some control over the national accounts, which I must say are now totally out of control.