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THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

Australian Defence Force

SPEECH

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SPEECH

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Speaker Burston, Sen Brian	Question No.

Senator BURSTON (New South Wales) (20:39): We often hear the acknowledgement of country whenever we go to an official engagement. We acknowledge the Aboriginal elders past and present. I have my own acknowledgement based on the historic nation of Australia. I think this is more reasonable and less biased towards one particular group of Australians. It goes like this: I acknowledge Australia's historic nation, forged by Christian explorers and pioneers from Britain and other European lands. It was created a federal Commonwealth under the Crown. I acknowledge Australia's first inhabitants, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as part of our nation.

I am proud to make that declaration because it acknowledges the origins of the whole nation—not only our British forerunners but all who have joined, including migrants of many backgrounds and Indigenous people. Our warriors have been willing to fight and die for the nation, and only the nation. That is what they give their lives for, so we should acknowledge the nation even above the Commonwealth and other identity groups.

The Australian Defence Force was formed to defend Australia and to protect its people and its interests. The service men and women who make up the ADF are Australian citizens who, whilst serving, must forgo basic human rights enjoyed by other citizens. They must comply with the additional legal and disciplinary requirements of military employment. When necessary, this will include taking up arms against Australia's enemies and defeating them in battle using lethal force. They will be called upon to make personal sacrifices, including the possibility of the ultimate sacrifice, and in every sense to act honourably in the service of the Australian people.

In return, members of the Australian Defence Force must always be able to expect, from the Commonwealth government on behalf of their fellow Australians, fair treatment, to be valued and respected as individuals, and that they and their families will be sustained and rewarded by commensurate terms and conditions of service. They further expect that those who are injured in service to the nation and the families of those who die as a result of their service will be suitably cared for and sustained. This mutual obligation forms the covenant between the nation, the ADF and each individual member of the ADF. It forms an unbreakable common bond of identity, loyalty and responsibility from which the Anzac spirit has emerged that has sustained the ADF in conflicts throughout its history.

There is no greater threat to our freedom than a lack of gratitude towards those who provide it. How often do we see people from this place and the other place hurry to be photographed with members of the ADF in uniform when they want to strike a patriotic pose to curry favour with the electorate or improve their public image? Similarly, how many former politicians did we see in this year's Australia Day honours list, and for doing what? We call it service to our country, but we do not really know what service to this country means unless we have pulled on a uniform and picked up a weapon to truly defend what is near and dear to every Australian. That includes police, fire and ambulance workers in the broader community, but today I want to focus on the ADF.

Imagine, if you will, Mr Acting Deputy Speaker, signing on the dotted line, undertaking months of extremely rigorous training—training that could cost you your life if you are not on the ball—and then, at the completion of training, being sent to a unit that is warned for deployment on war service or on active service. It does not matter if that unit is an Army unit, an RAAF unit, or a RAN ship; it does not matter if you are an experienced soldier, sailor or airman; it does not matter if you are male or female because when someone signs that document, he is willing to do whatever is asked of him, up to and including laying down his life for his comrades, his flag and his nation.

What would you expect in return? At the very least you would expect to be treated decently by those who sent you. Surely all here would agree with that. At the very least Australia should give service men and women what it promised them in return for doing what the nation asked. That is only fair.

If part of the deal of serving on war service or on active service is receiving a medal and financial benefits appropriate to those endeavours, surely it is incumbent upon us, via the ADF, to provide those soldiers, sailors and airmen who we put in harm's way with the recognition, benefits and rewards befitting their contribution, sacrifice and service. It may surprise some to learn that since the Korean War there have been a large number of servicemen who put their lives on the line for us and for the nation but have been denied the recognition they deserve.

Imagine if you worked for a company and your manager told you: 'We're opening an office in Singapore. We'd like to send you to manage that process. For doing so, all your accommodation, airfares and incidental expenses will be paid. You'll get additional leave entitlements and, if it goes well, a letter of commendation from the board of directors'—never mind any risk you will lose a limb or your life. So you go and do the job and perform as expected. Then you return to Australia on completion, only to have your manager say: 'We've decided that you don't get your expenses reimbursed. There's no additional leave and no letter of commendation.'

Most rational, reasonable people would conclude that they had been duded by their employer, and they would be right. Most people would agree that they had legitimate grounds for complaint and redress. For a lot of people it would be a deal-breaker and they would leave their employment. To my way of thinking, in that situation the employer would have breached the employment contract.

It gets worse. In 2014 Defence directed its legal teams to go into the records and edit them to deny some of those servicemen their benefits and recognition. It was not enough that these men went and served their country with distinction. They then had to come back and fight their employer for the recognition they so rightly deserved, all the time watching while that employer moved the goalposts. In other cases, following committees of inquiry, recommendations were made to provide recognition but those recommendations were ignored by the government.

What does it say about us as a society that we mistreat in such a manner those who provide us the safety and security to enjoy our freedoms? We need to have a good hard look at ourselves. We need to step up to the plate and do the right thing. If the government does not want to provide the benefits and recognition earned by these brave people, the solutions are quite simple: change the terms of their employment before they are put in harm's way or do not send them in the first place. They are not seeking anything that was not promised to them up front. We owe it to them. Sadly, in a lot of cases we owe it to their memory because a lot of these men have passed away while waiting for successive governments to meet their legal and moral obligations to them. Why do the public have such a low opinion of politicians? Here is a news flash: we keep letting them down on basic issues of morality like this.

To the best of my knowledge, since the Korean War the number of servicemen who are yet to be recognised for being on active service or on war service totals in excess of 20,000. The numbers include but are not limited to: Navy personnel who served on HMAS *Sydney* taking troops to or from Vietnam; soldiers from 1RAR, 2RAR, 4RAR and 8RAR who served in peninsular Malaysia between 1966 and 1969; soldiers who served at Rifle Company Butterworth from 1970 to 1989; and soldiers, sailors and airmen who served in East Timor. There may be more.

To highlight the discrepancies allow me to provide some comparison with RAAF Ubon in Thailand, Diego Garcia in the middle of the Indian Ocean, and Rifle Company Butterworth in Malaysia. I use these three examples because they are ostensibly similar in that the primary role of the ground troops was to protect an air base in an allied nation. The major differences were that Thailand was then at peace, Diego Garcia was in the middle of nowhere and Malaysia was embroiled in an internal conflict known as either the second Malayan emergency or the counterinsurgency war. The RAAF Airfield Defence Guard at Ubon never fired a shot in anger and neither did the troops on Diego Garcia, where the nearest enemy was nearly 1,700 kilometres away. They were never attacked and no-one lost his life or was seriously injured. They have been awarded full recognition by way of medals and financial benefits consistent with service in a war zone—the medal being the Australian Active Service Medal.

The Army troops who served at Rifle Company Butterworth engaged in a number of activities, including outside the wire, base defence and the like. They carried full front-line ammunition and a number of them lost their lives in non-combat incidents while serving there. Despite all that they have been denied recognition of the hazardous nature of their employment, receiving the lesser Australian Service Medal and no financial benefits. We owe them. We are better than this.

We owe it to all our service people who are deployed on war service or on active service not to play grubby, pedantic games with terminology, ducking and weaving to dud them out of their entitlements as if they were asking for something they did not earn. Think about this as we head towards another Anzac Day: are our veterans worthy of honourable treatment? Justice delayed is justice denied.