



Speech by

Hon. RUSSELL COOPER

MEMBER FOR CROWS NEST

Hansard 25 November 1999

ANZAC DAY AMENDMENT BILL

Hon. T. R. COOPER (Crows Nest—NPA) (12.06 p.m.): Unlike the member for Toowoomba North, I would not be game to pull rank on the member for Burleigh. I am happy to defer to the old warhorse from Burleigh. That was great.

Mrs Gamin: You could have phrased that more delicately. Should I take a point of order?

Mr COOPER: No, don't do that.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Mickel): Order! Does the member for Burleigh claim to have been hurt by that comment?

Mrs Gamin: I think I'll let the member for Crows Nest off the hook this time.

Mr COOPER: I am happy to take part in this debate and support the Bill. I want to refer to the Minister's second-reading speech because I would like to have it incorporated in my address which I will be circulating to RSL members in the electorate of Crows Nest. RSL members set a wonderful example for the community. I believe that this Bill will assist those people in continuing their wonderful work.

The objective of the amendment Bill is to amend the Anzac Day Act to introduce important new changes to the funding arrangements for the Anzac Day Trust Fund. The Anzac Day Act provides for the operation of the Anzac Day Trust. The trust administers the Anzac Day Trust Fund which collects and disburses funds for the general welfare of ex-service people, their dependants and related associations.

The major source of funding for the Anzac Day Trust Fund comes from Treasury by way of the allocation of proportions of various taxes collected each year. These allocations derive from general licences under the Liquor Act 1992—liquor licence fees—and taxes in relation to race betting on Anzac Day.

Additionally, under the current arrangements, past funding has varied from year to year depending upon such factors as the particular day on which Anzac Day fell and even the prevailing weather conditions on the day. The provisions are complex and difficult to administer. Accordingly, it has been necessary to revise the legislative arrangements to ensure that the trust receives appropriate funding in order to continue its important role within our community. The Opposition concurs with that.

The Minister went on to say that the grant has been calculated on an average of past funding in current dollar terms, with the initial grant being \$795,000 for the 1998-99 financial year. The grant will be indexed by the CPI annually thereafter. That, too, is a step in the right direction. The Minister went on to say that, importantly, the new grant arrangements have been approved and welcomed by the board of trustees of the Anzac Day Trust. These trustees represent organisations such as the RSL, Legacy and all other registered or incorporated organisations or associations of ex-service people.

Along with other honourable members, I, too, have RSL branches throughout my electorate. I believe this legislation gives us an opportunity to acknowledge the role that RSL members play in the community. I believe that RSL membership across Australia is something of the order of 200,000 members—perhaps even more. This is a very strong lobby group. As far as lobby groups are concerned, this group would have to be tops. What we have here is a group of people who are making

sure that Governments of the day—be they State or Federal and of whatever political persuasion—are doing the right thing by this country and its ex-servicemen.

In common with most members, I recognise the importance of Anzac Day. Many members of this House attend Anzac Day services on 25 April. Most members would probably attend two or three services, or as many as they can fit in. The participation in those services by the community is impressive, and that participation has increased dramatically over the years. In the early seventies, I noticed that the numbers of people attending those services were gradually increasing from the days of the fifties and sixties. The Anzac Day spirit permeates people, and they attend those services not because they are forced to but because they want to. The fact that our young people have taken an incredible interest in Anzac Day really means something; they are not just attending, they really mean it.

Mr Santoro: That is the most encouraging thing about it.

Mr COOPER: It is. They genuinely feel a real reason for being there. They genuinely recognise that our servicemen and ex-servicemen fought to keep this country free and to keep them free. I do believe that, through the benefit of that Anzac Day spirit, they will go on to bigger and better things and will become fantastic citizens.

My electorate has experienced some very tough times over a number of years. In 1991, the electorate was hit by a very, very severe drought and, with that, collapsing commodity prices. So much change and reform was foisted upon people by Government that it required enormous resilience on the part of people to survive. I honestly believe that the spirit of the Anzacs comes through at times like that when people need it most—when they need strength and encouragement and something to cling to. I believe that, when the chips are down and times are tough, that Anzac Day spirit permeates people and enables them to survive. I believe that the vast majority of people who do survive can hark back to the strength of Anzac Day.

I always attend Anzac Day services in the Kingsthorpe area. At Old Gowrie, they found an Anzac Day memorial honour board in an old railway building. They took it up to the school and placed it in the school grounds, and now they hold commemorative services there. To Rob and Anne Filmer and many others who got that going, I say that it has made a phenomenal difference. It is great to attend the dawn service there, especially with all those young people who attend because they want to be there, not because they are forced to be there.

Coominya, which is a small town near Lowood, has a memorial in the main street. The Anzac Day services that are conducted there are very, very well attended. Similarly, the Jondaryan memorial was erected in recent years, and that has meant that Anzac Day is remembered every time people drive past it.

Many members like to attend RSL dinners—except when Parliament is sitting, of course. The RSL clubs at Oakey, Goombungee, Crows Nest and many other places hold very fine dinners. It is the camaraderie that people go for, as well as the togetherness and the remembrance which holds districts together. In many respects, it is the glue that holds districts together.

I would like to pay respect to those people who are involved in the RSL branches in my electorate: Judy Schmidt, President of the Lowood RSL; Leigh Clayton, President of the Crows Nest RSL; Max Foote of the Goombungee RSL; Dave Cronin of Oakey; I have mentioned Bob Baulch of Oakey before; Barry Mitchell, President of the Toogoolawah RSL; and Norm Mundy, President of the Esk RSL. All of those people and all of their fellow members make a tremendous contribution to the districts that they represent. They set a fine example for others to follow.

There are some things that really annoy me. Sometimes the media tends to blow things out of all proportion. In light of the trouble in East Timor, the Anzac spirit has come to the fore. I believe that that situation has been handled professionally and fault free by the commanders and the troops involved. When we see headlines such as "Aussies blamed in Timor skirmish" we wonder, "What have they done?" This particular article states that—

"Australia has been blamed for a Timor border skirmish that left an Indonesian policeman dead and another wounded."

But further on, the article states—

"But the UN report praised the actions of two brave Australian soldiers who approached the Indonesian lines with their rifles raised to negotiate a truce. It also condemned the Indonesians for overreacting to the accidental incursion."

The report goes on to say—

"The UN report released yesterday described how Diggers from 2 Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, were patrolling up to the border on October 10 when Indonesian forces opened fire.

During the 10-minute gun battle, captured by TV cameras, hundreds of rounds were exchanged and Australian soldiers only narrowly escaped injury.

An Australian Defence Force spokesman last night refused to concede Australian troops had been in West Timor."

They had been using Indonesian maps, anyway. I believe that gives a false impression. The Army does not concur with that particular report, and I want to make sure that the members of the RSL clubs in my electorate do not take that particular report seriously. Most people would realise that the way in which the situation in East Timor has been handled has been exemplary. I just wish that the media would stick to the facts and not give people a false impression, because that is extremely unfair.

I support this Bill. Many other members of this House have recognised RSL clubs and members throughout their electorates. May they continue to set a fine example for people throughout this State and nation.
