



Speech by

Hon. KEN HAYWARD

MEMBER FOR KALLANGUR

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AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE RESERVES

Hon. K. W. HAYWARD (Kallangur—ALP) (5.19 p.m.): I rise to highlight what I think is a problem for reservists with the Australian Defence Force, particularly reservists serving overseas. I think this is an issue that all fair-minded Australians would be concerned about.

The efforts of reservists have been highlighted recently in military operational activities, particularly in East Timor and Bougainville. Australians have honoured the commitment of forces in those areas. All sorts of politicians, particularly the Prime Minister, have talked about what good works they have done. There have been honour parades. Generally there has been a lot of positive talk about how those troops have performed in those theatres. State and Federal Governments have joined in strongly to bask in the glory of the circumstances surrounding the troops serving in East Timor and Bougainville.

I do not have a military background and I was personally unaware of the problems faced by reservists. They have spoken to me about a particular issue faced by them, which I think both State and Federal Governments need to address, which is that there is no protection of employment for reservists who are called on to serve their country overseas. The Federal Government in particular needs to play a strong role and involve itself in this issue. This is a matter of fairness. I think all fair-minded Australians would expect that the jobs of reservists called on to volunteer for duty overseas would be there on their return.

The reserve component of the Australian Defence Force provides a significant percentage of total force strength. Reservists commit their time, energy and experience—many reservists have previously served as full-time soldiers—as part of their service to the wider community. Apart from the normal issues facing members of the Australian Defence Force, members of the reserve force have the added concern of job security and potential discrimination in the employment arena. I think this is an issue that needs to be talked about within State Parliaments and addressed by the Federal Parliament, particularly as we have seen Federal politicians such as the Prime Minister—it is not just the Prime Minister—basking in the glory of the efforts of these people who have served so honourably in representing Australia in the United Nations forces overseas.

A number of issues currently challenge Australian Defence Force reservists. The first one that needs to be addressed is the lack of legislative protection to ensure that jobs are preserved when reservists volunteer for service in contingencies short of war. As I understand it, legislation preserves the jobs of reservists if they are involved in war service. In the case of peacekeeping activities, as in East Timor or Bougainville, there is no requirement that the jobs of reservists be preserved.

At present, Federal legislation does not allow for reservists to be ordered overseas in contingencies short of war. While many reservists are currently serving in East Timor, each must volunteer for that service. Hence, the argument is that the Federal Government does not owe an obligation to protect the jobs of reservists. If the general public were aware of this issue there would probably be an outcry, particularly in light of the way people have gloried in the success of the forces in East Timor.

Many employers have documented policies regarding the employment of reservists. I think those employers should be commended for the support they give to their employees. It is a big challenge for them. Some companies have policies that recognise that reservists may be called to volunteer for peacekeeping service and ensure that their jobs are retained for when they return. However, many employers do not have the desire or the financial resources—that is another aspect of

the issue—to release members of their staff for reserve training or actual operations, such as in East Timor or Bougainville. We need to consider giving employers some incentive to support reservists in their organisations.

If there were a legislative requirement for employers to hold the jobs of reservists for their return from overseas service, reservists may have difficulty gaining employment, because the reality is that employers would be less likely to hire someone if they were required to provide some unsubsidised employment support. The Queensland Government does provide a high level of support to reservists who are public servants. However, I think we in this Parliament need to be more vocal in espousing the benefits of reserve service and the need to provide assistance, particularly in relation to job retention.

I have been told of incidents where reservists have resigned from their civilian jobs in order to serve as part of a reserve force. While the Federal Government revised its decision in relation to the Timor levy, the mere fact that a levy was even contemplated says a lot about the state of Australia's defence forces. It should not be acceptable for a person involved in a peacekeeping operation to run the risk of having their employment terminated or not made available to them on their return.

Each State in Australia has a defence reserve support committee. One of the principal roles of those committees is to develop employer support for reservists and help employers to understand the benefits of reserve service. I am told that those committees are hopelessly underfunded and need more support from the State Government and, more particularly, the Federal Government. The whole issue of defence is very clearly a Federal Government responsibility.

As the Queensland Government has demonstrated a commitment to reserve services, there is an opportunity for us in this Parliament to play a role in raising awareness of the value to the community of that service and of those issues relating to reservists' employment, which I am sure could be solved with a bit of thought.

The enactment of legislation is one answer to this problem, but I am reluctant to say that it will provide the absolute solution. It just seems a bit too simple to change the definition to include peacekeeping duties. As most of us know, the simple answer to a problem is usually the wrong answer. With a legislative change, my fear is that the first question a person is asked at a job interview will be, "Are you part of a reserve force?" and that when the person says, "Yes" the employer will say, "Thanks very much for your application. We will call you, don't call us."

These issues need to be addressed. The other important issue regarding reserve forces concerns self-employed reservists, because they face additional challenges and great personal difficulties. They suffer a financial disadvantage in undertaking reserve service. We need to consider whether or not employers should be compensated for the loss of staff members who undertake reserve duties. If employers are compensated they may be less hesitant to take on reservists. It is an issue of fairness. This Parliament needs to consider this matter, because a lot of people seem to be basking in the glory of what reservists have done. When a reservist returns to Australia it is vital that he has the opportunity to return to his former employment.
