

## APOLOGY TO VIETNAM VETERANS

### *Motion*

Resumed from 6 December on the following motion moved by Hon Frank Hough –

That this House -

- (1) Records that Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam War is a matter of regret in regard to the treatment of Australian troops on their return home from duty in Vietnam.
- (2) Supports the continuation of policies and programs that assist Vietnam Veterans and their families to recover from trauma associated with service in Vietnam and its aftermath.
- (3) Acknowledges their hurt resulting from the negative treatment they received, or still receive, from all those opposed to Australian involvement in Vietnam.
- (4) As part of the process of healing and rehabilitation, extends its apology to Vietnam Veterans for the loss and hurt they have suffered and may still suffer as a result of the Vietnam War, to say we are truly sorry.

**HON KIM CHANCE** (Agricultural - Leader of the House) [4.15 pm]: I do not intend to speak for much longer on this motion. I merely wish to review what I said last week in my contribution to this debate. I believe I fairly effectively covered the issues that I wanted to raise. In very brief summary, the Government's position is that Vietnam veterans, both men and woman, were badly treated in their reception in Australia on their return from Vietnam and, indeed, have been in the years that have followed right up to the present day. It is a matter of deep regret that their reception has been so lacking in feeling and compassion and has been so disrespectful of the great contribution that those men and women made in serving their country.

### *Amendments to Motion*

Hon KIM CHANCE: I propose two amendments to the motion, which effectively sum up the issues that I have raised. I move -

Paragraph (1) - To delete all words following the word "regret".

Paragraph (3) - To delete all words following "receive," and insert instead "as a result of their service during the Vietnam conflict".

If I might explain the proposed amendment to paragraph (1), the original wording of the motion first proposed by the mover of the motion, Hon Frank Hough, contained the words "records that Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam war is a matter of regret." That is exactly what we are proposing to revert to. For the reasons that I gave when I spoke on this matter last week, I believe that most of us would concede that Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War has been a matter of regret, not only for Australian servicemen and women but also most particularly for the Vietnamese people.

The second part of the amendment relates to paragraph (3) and is for the deletion of all the words following the word "receive" and the insertion instead of "as a result of their service during the Vietnam conflict". Paragraph (3) would therefore read -

Acknowledges their hurt resulting from the negative treatment they received, or still receive, as a result of their service during the Vietnam conflict.

This is a fundamental change to the words as originally proposed. The original wording implied that the negative treatment that Vietnam veterans received on their return to Australia was only from those who were opposed to Australia's involvement in Vietnam. That is certainly arguable at best and highly contentious at worst. Indeed, many of the people who have been active in supporting Vietnam veterans were vigorously opposed to our involvement in Vietnam. I know that many members of this House would know some of those people personally. I certainly know people who were vigorously opposed to our involvement in Vietnam but who have been supportive of the Vietnam veterans in trying to help them face the challenges that they have undoubtedly faced. For that reason, without seriously changing the intent of the motion, I believe the manner in which the Government has proposed to alter the words takes nothing from the intent of paragraph (3) of the motion moved by Hon Frank Hough. However, it reflects the situation more clearly and more accurately and does not contain the pejorative implication that only those who opposed Australia's involvement in Vietnam were responsible for the negative treatment of Vietnam veterans.

**HON PETER FOSS** (East Metropolitan) [4.20 pm]: I support the second of the amendments moved by the Leader of the House and I vigorously oppose the first. I support the second amendment for the same reason that

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I oppose the first. The Leader of the House has properly pointed out that the words in paragraph (3) of the motion introduce a different issue; that is, those who were in favour of the Vietnam War and those who were against it. He correctly pointed out that many members could argue that it is a matter of difference and could validly argue against it. More importantly, it would lead to members of the House being unable to support the motion on a bipartisan basis.

The PRESIDENT: Order members! I indicate to members that although I will allow debate on the amendments to the motion as a single amendment, they will be put in different parts so that members can vote separately on each part, if they wish to.

*Point of Order*

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: Mr President, for clarification, if you are going to put the amendment in two parts, does that mean members will be able to speak to each part separately and to the substantive motion?

The PRESIDENT: The question before the Chair is that the proposed amendments be agreed to. There will be an opportunity to debate once on that. I will then put the amendments in two separate parts, (a) and (b). Members will then have the right to speak to the substantive motion, following debate on the proposed amendments.

Hon DERRICK TOMLINSON: Thank you, Mr President, for your very wise counsel.

The PRESIDENT: Hon Derrick Tomlinson is welcome. Hon Peter Foss.

*Debate Resumed*

Hon PETER FOSS: I oppose the first amendment for the same reason that I support the second amendment. As soon as the House passes a motion which records regret at Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam War, it will move into a totally different area. We are dealing with Vietnam veterans. The question of whether it was a good idea for Australia to be involved in the Vietnam War is a different question, but also one about which we would have a fight. It would be of considerable regret if this motion, about serious injustice for years to Vietnam veterans, were used as an opportunity for either political point scoring or for a debate in which members would have to take opposite political sides.

Although I sympathise with the intent of the second amendment, which is ideal because it takes away the political issue - that is, there could be an argument about who made life a misery for these people - the important issue is that they have been hurt and that resulted from negative treatment they received or still receive. It does not matter how or why they received it. The injustice comes from the fact that they received it. In the same way, I do not believe the Leader of the House's first amendment should be countenanced, and I shall speak vigorously against it. I will not speak against it now because it would alter the tone of the entire debate. I would hate the debate to result in an argument about whether there should have been a Vietnam War and what the consequences of it were. That would be the biggest red herring in history. I ask the Leader of the House to withdraw his first amendment. I do not understand how he could move the first and second amendments at the same time, because they achieve totally different and opposing ends. One amendment removes the debatable issues and makes it a question on which we can get together and deal with the nub of the matter, and the other amendment inserts a debatable matter and sends us down a squirrel hole to debate a matter we should not be chasing at this time.

I urge the Leader of the House to withdraw the first part of his amendment and proceed only with the second part, in the interests of the House's dealing with the nub of the question. Because of that, Mr President, I do not intend to deal with the first part of the amendment. It would be a matter of considerable regret if the House were to deal with the first part when it has very important business before it; that is, the expression of the House's regret to those people who were involved in Vietnam. That is particularly so when we keep in mind the matters that have been raised in the debate and the fact that a large number of people involved were conscripted.

Although I did not go to Vietnam, I was in the ballot. I know the situation and what it was like, and I have friends who went to Vietnam. One in particular was a close friend of mine who was a year ahead of me in law school. He spent a considerable time in Vietnam and came back a totally different person. He was qualified, and had been admitted, as a lawyer. However, when he came back from Vietnam he just hated decision-making. The character change in him was extraordinary. He took a year off work, went around the world and tried to get his head back in order again, but never did. To this day he has not worked as a lawyer. I am not saying that he has not had a contented life, but there is no doubt in my mind that the impact of the war on him as an individual was intense and it affected him to the very foundations of his character and the way he looked at life. It is a matter of great regret to me. I am not saying that he has not had a happy life and has not had a fairly responsibility-free life. However, I am concerned at the different person who came back from Vietnam

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compared with the person I knew who went to Vietnam. I do not know that he would regret Australia's involvement in Vietnam. I do not know that he would say he regretted going there. I do know that it had a massive impact on him, which was in no way helped by the almost aggressive and certainly unfriendly attitude towards Vietnam veterans and the fact that they were never treated in the way that they should have been treated. He would not have gone to Vietnam voluntarily. He did not go to the recruitment office and say he wanted to go to Vietnam to fight the war. He went because he saw it as his duty. He was one of the people caught in the ballot. It would never have occurred to him not to go. I do not believe he had any regrets about his involvement in Vietnam, but war changes people, and war is a frightening thing in which to be involved.

He came back to Australia, and received no support. He had to put up with the castigation that he and other conscripts received for having been participants in that war. I certainly agree with the principal motion and I support the Leader of the House's second amendment, but I sincerely ask the Leader of the House to reconsider whether he wishes to continue with his first amendment. Whatever his views might be, he will find that it will create an unfortunate political debate in the House on a matter on which I believe there is a significant degree of agreement among members. Whatever we might think about the war and the injustice that has been done to Vietnam veterans, there is a need for the motion to pass through the House with massive support on both sides. I therefore ask him to withdraw the amendment.

**HON KIM CHANCE** (Agricultural - Leader of the House) [4.30 pm]: I seek leave to withdraw my amendment to paragraph (1).

Leave not granted.

**HON JOHN FISCHER** (Mining and Pastoral) [4.30 pm]: I find it difficult to stay silent on the proposed amendments to the motion, because they so profoundly change the nature and purpose of the apology that it would be better, perhaps, not to make the apology at all. It is commendable that Australia can admit to its regret at ever being involved in the Vietnam conflict and losing 500 of its young men. It is also commendable that Australia can acknowledge the hurt that soldiers felt on their return home. However, these are only observations and acknowledgments, which are only half an apology and do not constitute the totality of one. What is required is an apology in the most literal sense, not a rambling set of statements that smack of an apology with qualifications. For just once let us put politics and political correctness aside and be brave enough to define what we need to apologise to the Vietnam veterans for. Let us be as brave as the soldiers who faced death on a daily basis as a consequence of a government decision.

I want the reasons behind this apology to be clear as a bell for generations to come, so that our grandchildren will know exactly why this motion was instigated in the first place. It makes us stronger as a nation if we can take the mistakes of the past and turn them into something positive. I am told it is easy to be wise in hindsight. If this is the case, it should not be difficult to itemise where we went wrong as a nation and how we can put right our mistakes. I want the veterans who lost so much as a consequence of this war to feel that this apology was worth waiting decades for, and to finally feel vindicated for the treatment they suffered at the hands of other Australians with so-called good intentions. They were cheated out of the possibility of ever having a normal life in the 1960s. I do not want them to feel cheated again by the wording of this apology.

Let us not forget that these were 20-year-old kids with no combat training who were conscripted. It is very important that we remember that they were conscripted to fight in the Vietnam War. They had no choice but to risk their lives to make good on promises uttered by politicians or else go to jail. Nearly 500 of these young men were killed in a foreign land that was utterly alien and hostile to them. Approximately 3 000 of these young men endured an unprecedented level of fear for their small number of years. They lived in the dirt of the trenches and they slept with the sound of bullets whistling overhead and the sound of exploding mortars. Even now they live with the memory of seeing their countrymen being blown apart and the countless other atrocities of war. On the battlefield of Vietnam they were maimed and broken.

The Government acted as a predator when it conscripted these young men. It preyed on their youth and lack of worldly experience. I wonder how many older men would have gone as quiescently into battle as these kids did. With age comes wisdom. These kids had neither, only boundless energy and potential. They were virtually babes who were thrown to the wolves in a foreign war, the real reasons for which we still can now only guess at. They fought in the tradition of their fathers and their grandfathers who took up arms in the First and Second World Wars. When they finished their tour of duty these men and boys were confronted with hostility of a different sort on setting foot at home. Perhaps we can call it "friendly hostility" in that it came from other Australians and not directly from the Vietcong; yet the wound it made cut just as deeply as the wounds from the armed conflict. We owe the soldiers and the national service kids who were sent to Vietnam a debt of gratitude. They served without complaint and showed enormous courage that masked their tender years.

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If the war was wrong, it was the fault of our politicians. It was certainly not the fault of the courageous young Australians who put their lives on the line for the protection of their fellow countrymen and women. It was wrong of misguided people to treat them with hatred and ignorance on their return, and we should admit that. The memory of Vietnam diminishes with each passing year, but not to the men who fought there. The politicians who made the call to send our young men to Vietnam have gone unpunished. The Australians who berated our returned soldiers with insults and accusations on their return have also gone unpunished. This may be our last opportunity to get it right before the memory of Vietnam fades altogether and all who served there pass on. I ask the Leader of the House to rescind his amendments and prove that at last, after all these years, we have a Government that has the courage to openly express the debt and the gratitude that some of our finest citizens deserve.

**HON DEE MARGETTS** (Agricultural) [4.36 pm]: I appreciate the opportunity to speak to this motion. I was among the voices that did not provide leave for the withdrawal of the amendments by the Leader of the House, which brings us back to the original wording of the motion. I did that because I believe that at some stage the House should have the chance to vote on that motion. As Hon John Fischer said, we need to know what we support and to put qualifications aside on this issue. This is important, because the matter of regret perhaps is important so that the general community can see that people may have views in relation to regret about this conflict, but that does not mean that they do not fully support and believe in strongly the need to support and recognise the concerns of Vietnam veterans, and to acknowledge what they have been through and the contribution they have made.

It is true, as the Leader of the House has indicated, that on a number of occasions and in similar circumstances that I can think of, the support for Vietnam veterans has not necessarily been given only by those who supported their going, and the lack of support on their return has not all come from the one direction. The peace movement in general has made some strong links with Vietnam veterans. I know that from being in the peace movement and being the state coordinator for nuclear disarmament in the late 1980s and three years from there. It is also similar in some ways to the support that has been sought from and given to some of the veterans from the Maralinga nuclear tests. Those people who did not necessarily support the nuclear tests have given perhaps the greatest support for those wanting recognition and assistance in dealing with their injuries, hurt and problems associated with their involvement there. They served their country in the way they were asked but have had to deal with issues later. There have been many occasions like that in which most people express concern about the process, whether it was involvement in war, nuclear testing or some other thing required of military personnel. Questioning authority is not generally acceptable for military personnel. It is not necessarily people in peace movements who create the greatest problems for those people later.

I refer to the stark example of Agent Orange particularly and other chemicals that were used in the Vietnam conflict. There are, of course, examples in the Gulf War of the use of depleted uranium. There are still major problems for Gulf War veterans in getting recognition of and assistance with the problems associated with that. Whether it was the depleted uranium or the cocktail of vaccinations that was used, for a range of reasons there is still a lack of recognition of, and deep problems for, those people who fought in the Gulf War. Once again, it is not necessarily a lack of concern by those who were concerned about the level of involvement in that war; often, it is a lack of concern by the Government that required the commitment of those troops.

My colleague Hon Jim Scott has indicated that if the first paragraph of the motion had stated, "Records that Australia's military involvement in the Vietnam War is a matter of regret especially in regard to the treatment of Australian troops on their return home from duty in Vietnam", that has a broad meaning that most people could understand and agree to.

I certainly support the amendment to paragraph (3), and I have given the reasons for that. I believe that paragraph (3), as it stands, is inaccurate; therefore, to vote on that would be to vote on a clear and demonstrable inaccuracy, because the assumption is that the lack of support for Vietnam veterans has come primarily from those who did not support their involvement in Vietnam. It is true that there was some bad behaviour by some people in Australia who threw paint etc at returned service people. However, there is bad behaviour in just about any group in society, and often that is reported in the media, and not the general behaviour of the wider population.

I propose another amendment; that is, an amendment that recognises that in the case of the Vietnam War, the families of Vietnam veterans also need to be recognised and assisted. That is perhaps the case in other wars also. The hurt and loss are similar to what was described by Hon Peter Foss. People who believed they knew a person before he went to Vietnam found that that person seemed completely different after returning from Vietnam. Vietnam veterans may have suffered loss because of the deaths of others involved in the war, or suffered debilitating illnesses or injury. They may have also suffered psychological problems, which are also an injury.

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Some suffer ongoing health problems, and there are second generation health problems from Agent Orange. They are still trying to have those problems recognised and accommodated.

The PRESIDENT: The member might like to foreshadow her amendment at this stage, because we deal with amendments one at a time.

Hon DEE MARGETTS: I thank the President for his advice. I foreshadow that I will move -

In part (4), after "Vietnam Veterans", to insert the words "and their families".

If it is amended, the basis of the motion is good. There must be recognition of, and perhaps an apology to, the families of veterans who have, in their own way, also suffered deeply from the impacts of the Vietnam War on the people they love. They have suffered physical separation from and loss of the people they love. In some cases, they have been involved in trying to help. There have been many broken families, and perhaps many of those families would still be together if it were not for the Vietnam War. I urge support for my foreshadowed amendment. In general, if the proposed amendments of the Leader of the House are supported, the Greens (WA) will support this motion.

**HON SIMON O'BRIEN** (South Metropolitan) [4.44 pm]: The motion before the House seems to me to be in the wrong place. Matters such as defence, immigration and others are, of course, the province of the federal Parliament by virtue of section 51 of the Australian Constitution. It seems to me that we are spending some time in this place considering matters that are the province of the federal Parliament, rather than dealing with the many important issues of the day that should be addressed more directly and more often by this Parliament. Nonetheless, anything can be related in some way or other to our own state jurisdiction, and we can do that with this subject as well, because it touches on all the Australian community and, to some extent, on the Australian psyche.

Australia's involvement in Vietnam consisted of an initial commitment of about 60 experienced staff of the Australian Army, who went in as the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam, generally known as the AATTV. They distinguished themselves in their role in training and helping to lead the army of the Republic of South Vietnam, which was having a great deal of difficulty at the time. Indeed, four Victoria Crosses were awarded to Australian service personnel during the Vietnam conflict, and they were all members of the Australian Army Training Team Vietnam.

In due course, the involvement of Australians in the Vietnam conflict was increased in the mid 1960s, until ultimately some 8 000 personnel were on duty in Vietnam at the peak of Australia's involvement. All told, just over 50 000 troops of all types, including naval, Air Force and auxiliary personnel, were deployed to Vietnam. It is hard to obtain an exact figure, because the figures that exist do not necessarily differentiate between personnel who completed one tour of duty and others who completed more than one tour of duty. Of particular interest, of course, in our memory should always be the number of Australians who lost their lives as a direct result of their involvement in the Vietnam conflict. They number some 550. Again, not all of them were killed in action.

The point has been reached when we must consider our remoteness from the days of the Vietnam conflict. Casualties still occur as a result of that service, even though they may not have been on the field of battle on a particular day. Those casualties may be as a result of injuries sustained cutting short someone's life, or as a result of other infirmity arising from war service, which cut short a service person's life many years after the Vietnam conflict. That is what the subjects in this motion we are considering are all about, and it is what we should be focusing on in the Parliament. I will come to the brief exchange that occurred between Hon Peter Foss and the Leader of the House in a moment, because an important matter was dealt with.

The motion covers a wide area of interpretation and a number of separate areas of focus. As Hon Peter Foss has pointed out, this motion has considerable potential for divisiveness because of the views that may be held, and held very strongly, by different members of this House. It is also equally important to note that there is no point - indeed, it would be counterproductive - in passing or defeating a motion such as this on a 17-16 or 16-17 basis. We should not bother with this motion unless we can have a statement of principle to which the House can overwhelmingly commit. Therefore, we need to focus in this debate on what we can agree on and what message we really want to send to the people whom we are talking about; that is, the surviving Vietnam veterans, and, as Hon Dee Margetts pointed out, the families of those veterans, because in many cases the effect of their family member's service touches on them as well.

I found it very interesting that when Hon Frank Hough moved this motion, he gave a substantial amount of detail about the viewpoint of a range of former private soldiers on the effect of service in Vietnam, not only at the time but also in the decades that have followed. The reason that I was particularly interested in Hon Frank Hough's remarks is that coincidentally, and probably unbeknown to him, I had gone to see a number of the personalities whom he quoted to find out what they thought about this motion. It is interesting that we have now come full

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circle. It also gives us some hope that if we are getting advice from the same sort of people, this House can reach some clear lines of agreement and thereby ensure that this motion achieves some useful things rather than just making a point for the sake of it.

The last time I spoke about this motion to a large group was earlier this year on the anniversary of the battle of Long Tan. Members will remember that the member who moved the motion gave us an account of that battle. I have spoken with former gunner Wormald about that battle. At Port Kennedy we have an old field gun that is part of the memorial, and when we celebrate the battle of Long Tan, gunner Wormald goes through the opening moments of the battle to the extent of reciting the firing orders that came down to the gun battery and led to the first shot being fired. That is part of the ceremony that has developed over the past few years and that is organised by a number of groups, notably the Totally and Partially Disabled Veterans Association of Western Australia. I have previously advised the House that for some years I have been working with some of the people in that organisation to establish a veterans respite centre. That is now progressing nicely, and I will talk about that on another occasion.

Some of those people were interested to hear about this motion that this House extend an apology. However, when I asked them what they thought about that, I was surprised by their response. Their response was basically that they want not an apology but an acknowledgment that they have certain health-related difficulties that can be sheeted home directly to their war service. What they want now, even though it is remote from the Vietnam conflict, is to be looked after by the Government. If a veteran is experiencing trauma as a result of having his leg amputated 30 years ago, he wants to be able to get the treatment that he needs. Veterans may have some other problems that relate to their war service. For example, many of these people are finding that the pills that they took to guard against malaria or fever did a jolly good job on a daily basis in Vietnam, but 30 years later they are suffering all manner of other effects that were not countenanced by anyone at the time and which it is suspected may relate to the environmental factors that existed all those years ago. Similarly, a number of former servicemen have an ongoing need for psychiatric services. That need can be traced back directly, at least in part, to their involvement in active service.

The Australian community is honour bound to provide this health care to its veterans, because if it is good enough for our community, whether it be through conscription or whatever other device, to demand of its citizens that they serve this country, then this community also has a responsibility to attend to the consequences that have been visited upon the health of these service personnel and their families as a direct result of that service. That responsibility is easy to recognise if a person has been killed in action and has left behind a widow and possibly also some orphans who need to be looked after. However, we need to understand that it applies to a range of other criteria as well. These include social adjustment and psychiatric assistance, and a gamut of health-related matters such as physical trauma, disease and a range of syndromes that may manifest at a time far removed from the causal effect. Therefore, I was interested that when I asked a number of these veterans about the motion to extend an apology, they said what they want is for us to provide what they really should be entitled to. We may find the odd veteran who has a different view, but generally it is not an apology that they are seeking.

I was also interested to hear the feelings of returned servicemen - and this matter relates particularly to Army personnel, and to a lesser extent to some units of the Royal Australian Air Force - about the protestors who marched in the streets or tried to disrupt or prevent the welcome home parades. By and large, they were not that worried about it. Most of these guys are reasonably tough in the sense that yes, it is hurtful at the time, but it does not take much to get over that and it is not something that governs their every waking conscious thought. There are other aspects of life to get on with, such as family, work and looking after their mates if they are involved in some of the self-help organisations that exist. It comes back to the community doing the right thing. Of course, it makes one angry if as a conscript who has been sent overseas one discovers there is opposition at home and people want to disrupt supply routes through various forms of action.

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