

Senate, Monday 27 November 1999

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Joint: Report

Senator FERGUSON (South Australia)(4.13 p.m.) —I present the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade on a visit to the northern defence bases, together with the minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Senator FERGUSON —I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Senator FERGUSON —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

The visit, encompassing visits to selected Defence establishments in Queensland and the Northern Territory, was initiated by the Defence Subcommittee following its re-establishment in the 39th Parliament. Primarily a familiarisation activity, the tour provided an excellent opportunity for members of the Defence Subcommittee to acquaint themselves with some of the current capabilities of the Australian Defence Force and its disposition in northern Australia. Although brief, the tour covered a considerable amount of territory and included visits to a range of Navy, Army, Air Force and joint Defence Force establishments. The subcommittee was exposed to a wide range of Defence capabilities and a large variety of issues.

Time does not permit me to address the details of the visit or all of the observations made by the subcommittee. However, I must note that the subcommittee was particularly impressed with the efforts of the 1st Brigade in the recent achievement of an increased state of readiness. And we all know of events that have come to pass since our visit. All personnel in the brigade are to be commended on their efforts in this regard. The current status of the 1st Brigade provides Australia with a formidable asset that will only be improved by planned enhancements to the formation's capability. Events this month have clearly justified the government's earlier decision to increase the readiness of the 1st Brigade.

In the report the committee makes a number of observations, noting the significant surveillance capability of the ADF deployed in northern Australia, the marked capability improvement provided by the ongoing night fighting enhancement to the 3rd Brigade and the training opportunities and advantages offered by the newly commissioned weapon training simulation system demonstrated during the visit to Lavarack Barracks in Townsville. My colleague Senator Quirke, who was with us on that visit, will no doubt remember very well that training simulation system.

The report also contains two recommendations by the committee. The first deals with financial allowances paid to personnel posted as caretaker staff to the RAAF bare bases at Learmonth, Curtin and Scherger. While caretaker staff are paid allowances to compensate for the increased costs of living associated with their posting, the subcommittee was advised that such allowances are insufficient. Indeed, it was suggested that an accompanied member could be significantly financially disadvantaged as a result of a posting to the caretaker staff of a bare base. Accordingly, the committee has recommended that the government conduct a review of the financial allowances paid to caretaker staff at the bare bases Scherger, Learmonth and Curtin.

The second recommendation addresses the issue of proposed changes to the fringe benefits tax reporting requirements. This was an issue which genuinely concerned many of the ADF personnel encountered during our visit. It was argued that the implications of the proposed changes would be significant for some service personnel, particularly in the areas of income tested government payments, liability for child support, liability for HECS, the

superannuation contribution surcharge and the liability for the Medicare levy surcharge. The committee notes that since the tour this issue of FBT reporting has, in part, been addressed with the government moving to exempt defence rental subsidies from FBT reporting requirements.

However, while the decision to exempt defence housing assistance from FBT reporting was a positive move, the committee accepts that some defence personnel will still be financially worse off as a result of the proposed changes to FBT reporting. The committee is firmly of the view that financial conditions of service for ADF personnel are unique and reflect the circumstances and conditions under which they serve. Accordingly, the committee has recommended that the proposed changes to the FBT reporting requirements should be further reviewed to ensure that ADF personnel are not disadvantaged.

I conclude on the issue of the ADF's most important capability, and that is its people. The subcommittee was very impressed by the enthusiasm and the professionalism of the ADF personnel that we encountered during the whole of our visit. They were well trained, capable and committed to the service of this nation. We as a nation should be very proud of our Defence Force and the people who comprise and serve in it. Of course, many of those personnel are now involved in Australia's efforts in support of INTERFET. I take this opportunity on behalf of the committee to thank the men and women of the Australian defence forces for their commitment to this task and to wish them well. For those deployed in East Timor, we wish them all a very safe return.

I also comment on the secretariat again for their outstanding effort, particularly Michael Ward, in putting this whole visit together and for the manner in which it was conducted and for the way in which we were treated and received by all of the Defence Force personnel throughout all of the bases we visited in Northern Australia. It was a well worthwhile visit and one in which we were well looked after and given a comprehensive review of the state of readiness of Australia's defence forces. All of us on that trip could not be more impressed with our state of readiness and of the enthusiasm of the Defence Force personnel whom we spoke to and visited during that whole visit. I certainly would offer my thanks to the secretariat, particularly the secretariat of the Defence Subcommittee, who put so much time and effort into making sure that that visit to the Northern Australian bases was so worthwhile. I commend the report to the Senate.