

Government apologises to Australian Defence abuse victims

DEFENCE Minister Stephen Smith has made a parliamentary apology to victims of abuse within the Australian Defence Force.

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PM Julia Gillard with Warren Snowden and Wayne Swan during the apology in Parliament. Picture: Gary Ramage *Source: News Limited*

DEFENCE Minister Stephen Smith has made a parliamentary apology to victims of sexual and other abuse within the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

"To those men and women in the Australian Defence Force or the Department of Defence who have suffered sexual or other forms of abuse, on behalf of the government I say sorry," he told Parliament today.

"You should never have experienced this abuse."

Prime Minister Julia Gillard and her deputy Wayne Swan were present in the lower house for the apology.

The ADF had demonstrated the highest standards of professionalism in peace and in wartime, Mr Smith said.

"But, terribly and sadly, the experience of some members of the Australian Defence Force over the years has not always reflected these high standards," he said.

"Not all members of the Australian Defence Force have been treated with the necessary respect required to meet both common decency and these high standards."

Young men and women had suffered treatment which no member of the defence force or the community should experience.

"(They) have endured sexual, physical or mental abuse from their colleagues which are not acceptable and do not reflect the values of a modern, diverse (and) tolerant Australian society," Mr Smith said.

The minister also acknowledged the "shameful" Skype sex scandal at ADFA where a video of a female cadet having consensual sex with a male cadet was streamed on the internet without her knowledge.

Canberra Opposition defence spokesman Stuart Robert offered the Coalition's "strongest and unqualified support" for the government's apology and inquiry.

"Abuse destroys lives. It limits our operational capability and undermines public confidence in our defence force," Mr Robert told Parliament.

"This abuse should never have happened and every effort must and will be made to ensure that it does not happen again."

"We deeply sympathise with and say sorry to those who have experienced abuse at the hands of those who were to be trusted with their leadership and their care.

"Theirs was a great betrayal."

Defence force chief General David Hurley also said sorry to all who experienced sexual, physical or mental abuse while serving in the ADF.

General Hurley said defence service was tough and demanding and defence members must be able to pursue their aspirations in an environment free from physical, mental and sexual abuse.

He said the nature and range of abuses outlined in the review conducted by law firm DLA Piper showed defence hadn't always provided such an environment.

"The number, nature, and range of allegations demonstrates that some members of the ADF have failed to understand the responsibility that rank imposes, that rank is a privilege and not a licence for domineering, belittling or predatory behaviour," General Hurley said in a statement.

"Some have failed to accept that diversity, diversity of age, gender, race, culture and experience is a strength in the ADF that needs to be built upon and not torn down."

General Hurley said the ADF had begun addressing the causes of this abuse.

"But I, as the head of the ADF, recognise the suffering that some have experienced," he said.

"On behalf of the ADF, I say that I am sorry to those who have suffered sexual, physical or mental abuse while serving in the ADF."

Taskforce to investigate defence abuse Defence

Defence will be forced to pay up to \$50,000 to hundreds of victims of abuse under a sweeping response to a major review of sexual and other abuse following the so-called "ADFA-Skype" sex scandal.

And serving military personnel allegedly involved in past abuse will be referred to police for possible prosecution.

Defence Minister Stephen Smith ruled out a Royal Commission as he announced that a high level taskforce, led by former WA Supreme Court judge and ex-Defence Judge Advocate General retired Major General Len Roberts-Smith, would examine more than 770 cases of alleged abuse.

Mr Roberts-Smith is the father of Victoria Cross winner SAS soldier Ben Roberts-Smith.

He will be joined on the taskforce by former head of the Attorney General's Department Robert Cornall, former Sex Discrimination Commissioner Susan Halliday and Australian Federal Police deputy commissioner Rudi Lammers.

The taskforce will administer a compensation scheme that provides payments of up to \$50,000 dollars for victims.

It will have the power to refer specific cases to state-based authorities for further investigation and possible prosecution. It can also refer matters to the military justice system or other defence process.

Other systems announced by the Minister include:

- * A free telephone hotline 1800 424 991 so that complainants can access information about the government's response.
- * Restorative justice processes where a victim and alleged perpetrator come face to face
- * Counselling and health and other existing services;

The government's wide ranging response to alleged abuse follows 775 credible claims identified by law firm DLA Piper between 1951 and 2011.

The task force will be funded from the Defence budget and could cost up to \$40 million.

"In the end there is a price to pay and Defence will bear the burden of the cost of this matter," Mr Smith said.

Mr Smith has commissioned DLA Piper to collate claims and suggest possible courses of action.

The earliest case relates to the abuse of a 13-year-old boy in 1951, while the most recent relates to events in 2011.

Mr Roberts-Smith said there were very significant privacy issues associated with the allegations and he was determined to maintain procedural fairness.

Sex Discrimination Commissioner Liz Broderick said harassment and abuse divided teams and impacted negatively on operational effectiveness.

In addition to the above measures Mr Smith also announced the government's response to the Broderick review of the treatment of women at ADFA and in Defence.

These include:

- * Establishing a dedicated Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response Office
- * Implementing restricted reporting, so that personnel can make confidential reports of sexual harassment, sex discrimination and sexual abuse outside the chain of command
- * Waivers for Initial Minimum Provision of Service and Return of Service Obligations for victims of sexual assault/ harassment
- * Increasing diversity on promotion boards and selection for most senior positions;
- * Introducing growth targets for recruiting women
- * An annual Women in the ADF report to report on implementation of the Reviews recommendations and related initiatives

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