



Plymouth Sutton

Linda Gilroy MP

Responding to The Royal British Legion's 'Honour the Covenant' Campaign

The Government attaches the very highest priority to supporting the needs of our armed forces and their families. For instance, recent initiatives include:

- Project SLAM (Single Living Accommodation Modernisation), a £1.4 billion project to provide single en-suite rooms for trained personnel of all ranks, delivering 15,000 new bed spaces over the next six years. (See www.projectsclam.co.uk). The Single Living Accommodation at HMS Drake has been refurbished under this programme and is, I understand, a big improvement on what was available previously.
- Personnel serving on operational deployment for six months or longer now receive a tax-free bonus payment; and armed forces personnel serving in Iraq and Afghanistan who pay council tax on a UK property will shortly receive a tax free rebate of £140, designed to offset 25% of council tax payments made whilst on deployment. I see this as a first step within current budgets and will be more than happy to argue for a greater rebate in future years.

With regards to the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme, I completely agree that we should do everything we can to support those personnel injured in the course of their duties and that is why the Government recently undertook a review the Scheme. I am pleased to say that service personnel who have sustained serious multiple injuries in a single incident will now receive a full lump sum payment for each injury. In addition to an upfront, tax-free, lump-sum payment, the scheme also provides the Guaranteed Income Payment (GIP) to those who have been more seriously injured. GIP is tax-free, inflation-proof and paid for life, on discharge.

On October 1st, I took part in a local event to launch the Roger Lowe Asbestos Mesothelioma Campaign for those suffering from exposure to asbestos – a very big issue because of the dockyard. There are very significant compensation issues which I have been, and will continue to be, actively engaged in pursuing, particularly concerning those encountering asbestos through their naval service.

As I have mentioned above, significant improvements are being made in areas such as accommodation, medical treatment and welfare. The fact that our armed forces are engaged simultaneously in two major operations means that these things are very much in the spotlight. There are rightly increased expectations as to how we should treat not only servicemen and women serving in, and returning from, those theatres, but also their families and those veterans who have seen recent action.

These men and women, some of whom are still in their twenties, have participated in some of the most intense fighting seen since the Korean War. Ensuring they have the equipment and infrastructure in theatre to support them is therefore a major priority. I was very impressed with the accommodation at Basra Air Base when I visited last year – and heard people saying this is the best they'd ever had on deployment. However, there is certainly scope for improvement, for instance, in the time available to send email messages and phone home and for parcels to be delivered for free.

I therefore welcome the Royal British Legion's efforts to highlight the issues that our servicemen and women and their families face.



“Trying to make sure that we get good value for money in our equipment procurement budget, and seeking ever improving conditions for serving personnel and their families, are key reasons I sought to serve on the Defence Select Committee”.

I have now been selected to stand for a fourth term as MP serving the constituency taking in Devonport, to be called Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, which includes the largest dockyard in Western Europe and is home to thousands of service personnel and their families. I spend at least two days a week when Parliament is sitting - often more - dealing with the Defence Committee and related issues.

I have tried to ensure that family issues appear regularly on our agenda and I am pleased to say that last year we carried out a major enquiry into education services for the children of service personnel which is already changing Government policy. I also argued, before it was a hot topic, to have Defence Estates put on our agenda and our recent report on this should again help

refocus priorities within the budget and keep up momentum in tackling outstanding issues.

Similarly, I campaigned to ensure that we did an enquiry into health services and this is turning into a really far reaching and interesting review. It has the potential to help improve many of those matters which people are raising in the British Legion Campaign, particularly in the arena of mental health. The work of Combat Stress has taught us much and we recently visited Headley Court, where the rehabilitation work shines out as a beacon of good practice. I am very pleased to see the public have taken the opportunity to get behind the campaign, led by Jeremy Clarkson and his wife Francie, to enhance what are generally recognised as excellent facilities.

I was also pleased when the Prime Minister, in response to a question I asked him about recognising the work of our troops, answered:

“I want us to recognise the contribution made by our armed forces more than we have done, and to support the families of our armed forces when they are abroad, in combat and in the firing line. I also hope to be able to announce new measures to help those who have been injured fighting for our country with compensation schemes that are more generous than they have been in the past”.

I was even more pleased when, a few days later, additional funding for Combat Stress was agreed. However, this is a very important area and one which I am sure will be covered in the report of our Defence Select Committee enquiry which is drawing to a conclusion.

I will go on doing my best to represent the interests of men, women, children and families, as well as the significant defence community, in my constituency and am pleased to hear from people (in confidence, if preferred) about their experiences and concerns.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Linda Gilroy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

LINDA GILROY
Member of Parliament for Plymouth Sutton

October 2007