

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION REVIEW INTO VETERANS REHABILITATION ETC

As a LEGATEE, a member of the RSL and a 24 year "Vet" I have a personal concern over some of the recommendations of the Productivity Commissions' draft report into "Veterans Compensation and Rehabilitation, a Better Way to Support Veterans". I note a Public Hearing is due to be held in Adelaide on the 4th of February 2019 and would appreciate if the following could be considered.

The PCs published summary is lengthy (over 70 pages) and complex, the full report is very lengthy and difficult to fully comprehend. Seeing that the review had its genesis in a Senate report into Veterans suicide, the review seem to be greatly exceeding this initial brief.

Essentially the review is now about disbanding DVA and making processes simpler and ' fit for purpose' as well as making them more contemporary. Efficiency and effectiveness are stressed, as is best practice compared with other compensation schemes both within Australia and "similar jurisdictions". Fundamental reform is seen as a necessity. This is much more than an investigation into Veterans suicide as originally mooted by the Senate.

I would agree that DVA as a Federal Department should be held accountable and reviewed from time to time. However, DVAs replacement with 2 new entities, one a Statutory body would seem both excessive, unnecessary and a retrograde step.

Defence is about preparing to defend the country. It is about deliberately putting its people in harm's way. Its record in providing services and support for families has never been good. It will always have competing operational needs which must come first. In 1987 as a result of the abysmal mess it created, it was compelled by Government, to hand over its Housing portfolio to DHA. The temptation to underfund non - operational priorities is always there. Facilities and infrastructure maintenance is a case at point in today's ADF. How the Commission expects Defence to adequately handle welfare at the proposed level is very contestable.

However, from a recent ABC radio program, Commissioner Fitzgerald (assuming he is not being taken out of context) confidently seems to predict that this is all a done deal. In the statement he made on the AM Program he goes on to say "Most" benefits for older vets would "remain". This sounds ominously like cost cutting and what exactly are "the very different needs and aspirations of younger vets" in the context of an efficiency review?

I'm sure the veterans community will view these and similar comments with concern. I could conceive a resultant electoral backlash, The Commissioner's own words certainly sound "bold and far reaching" in the context of an election year!

In typical manner the Commission fails to recognize there is no civilian equivalent to service in the defence of our country and possibly not with any other country. Comparing different countries rehabilitation and compensation schemes ignores both our history and social mores and risks comparing apples and oranges.

Similarly, in regard to Worker Compensation, no other Australian workers are put into warlike or risky circumstances as a course of their employment. Nor do they come under the jurisdiction of the Defence Act and its disciplinary provisions.

Soldiers do not have a union to protect their occupational safety and rights.

The review is very light on in regard to how to manage widows (ers) and dependents. These constitute the largest percentage in the client base of DVA which is in turn complex and disparate.

The complexity of the Veterans community and its needs has led to the genesis of the Australian ESO. Although it is granted there are far too many of these in existence, the function and role of "genuine" ESOs in our society is invaluable. A tremendous amount of time and effort is put in by the various ESOs to assist veterans AND their families. Some ESOs are better than others and

worthy of public support; others are or have become little more than social clubs or 'pokies palaces'. The true status of these organisations needs to be sorted as the ACNC has started to do.

Much of the work of ESOs is purely voluntary and behind the scenes. The many hours spent are generally not recorded and therefore go largely unrecognised by society at large. Much of this work is remote from capital cities, is at the grass roots and is sometimes even unrecognised by the ESOs own governing bodies. The Commission might do well to note this, particularly in the context of volunteer assistance to dependents and widows.

Because of the complexity of DVA's client base it's little wonder the existing system has its shortcomings. However, a "simplified" system might overlook the reality and result in more people falling through the cracks. A 'one size fits all approach' may look attractive but splitting DVA into two and further watering down its already tenuous staff expertise may in effect be more of a problem.

The PC often refers to the "generosity" of the existing Vets compensation arrangement in Australia. Is this so? Our country has comparatively generous benefits across the entire national social welfare support system. Context should be kept in mind. How many of the DVA pensioners would be eligible for benefits from conventional age and social security benefits were they not covered by DVA? Is the aged component really attributable to the cost of Veterans support?

I think this issue needs clarification.

The \$13.7B DVA expenditure being quoted by the Commission would be totally out of context if it does contain an aged pension component and if so, is totally misleading.

Finally and in the context of the original Senate enquiry:

It would seem many young Vets had very little experience of societal norms and frustrations before enlistment and therefore have little or no experience of contemporary life or skills to cope with readjusting to "normality" when they leave the ADF. Anecdotal experience is that the ADFs resettlement processes do not bridge the gap in many cases. Nor are the contemporary Vets queuing up for assistance from ESOs.

Much of the criticism of DVA might result from Vets who do not have any background or skill in handling the processes involved in assimilation within society. They may possess little other than a high expectation to be treated to an unrealistic future and this combined with psychological issues might result in them not effectively putting in the investment in time and skills acquisition.

The apparent 83% positive feedback regarding DVA would not indicate that there is much of a real problem. How many Departments could reflect this satisfaction rate and how realistic is it to relate suicide to a recalcitrant DVA?

Reverting back to the Senates original intention it is difficult to conclude that the most likely motive behind the current PC review is Treasury driven and political, not to bring about any real improvement in veterans welfare. Where is the Commissions 'independence'?

I would strongly advocate that the answer is to treat the problem, not the symptom. Australia needs a Department of Defence to maintain National Security. It should not have its role muddled and become a quasi-welfare agency. We also need, a Department of Veterans Affairs to continue to support past and current Veterans AND their dependents. Finally, ESOs need to be better recognised as part of the solution and given encouragement to focus more on their primary functions in society. Anything else reduces Vets selfless service to the commonplace. They deserve better from their country.

Further suggestions:

1. If this review is being cost driven then it should declare its intention. A clearer statement of the aims of the review should be stated.
2. Contemporary Vets and those representing genuine ESOs should be more actively consulted with a view of gaining peer group input rather than the PC using various anecdotal quotes and references. Were the representative groups aware of the full scope of the review when initial consultative input was requested and are they being quoted out of context? Exactly who made the RSLNSW controversial comment concerning the Gold Card?
3. The Commission membership should include some representation of those most involved.
4. The entire review process should be simplified and findings restricted to the defined aims.
5. The cost of the review should be considered in the light of the aims.
6. Not to deny Vets their right to representation, the number of accredited ESOs should be reduced. Charitable and NFP status should also be reviewed and where appropriate unit or corps organisations substituted without an advocacy role.
7. A simplified more transparent SoP process should be established and the review board function retained. A better understanding of the various Acts might help.
8. Trained volunteer advocates should be encouraged and given public recognition.
9. Similarly DVA staff need to be better trained.
10. Existing ESOs should be encouraged to amalgamate and share resources.
11. Governments and the Commission need to recognise that the closure of regional health centres, hospitals and Repatriation facilities would inevitably have a flow-on effect on increasing rehabilitation and hence DVA running costs.
12. DVA costs relating to the aged component should be recognized as part of the cost of Social Security in general, not attributed to Veterans.
13. Contemporary ADF personnel should be able to have confidence in their command structure to encourage in service rehabilitation without generating any stigma or resultant automatic discharge from the service.
14. Establishment of a separate rehabilitation Command structure has some merit but would almost certainly be stigmatised and run counter to Defence aims and inevitably result in funding shortfalls.
15. Rather; a quasi-service pre discharge/ rehab and re-training system "normalised" as part of the soldiers return to society would be a better alternative. Financing this should definitely NOT come from within the ADF budget.