

**COMMENTS
ON
DRAFT PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION REPORT ON VETERANS SERVICES
BY
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Draft Report is an affront to Veterans. It lacks empathy with and understanding of Veterans' issues. If the Government were to adopt many of the recommendations in the Report it would be doing Veterans a grave injustice and would be abrogating its responsibilities to a group of people to whom the Nation is forever indebted.

The Report appears to have been prepared with limited knowledge and experience in Veterans matters, and with inadequate consultation, collaboration and research.

In compiling this Report, the Commission appears not to have thoroughly researched and considered the opinions of the wider Veteran community. It also appears to have focused on the circumstances and needs of younger 'contemporary' Veterans and the limited tempo of more recent war and war-like operations., like Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. We must not lose sight of the effects of larger scale conflicts such as WW11, Korea and Vietnam where the number and extent of physical and mental injuries will be greater.

This Report is, to a large extent, based on an incorrect, 'politically correct' definition of the word 'veteran' used by the Government. The current definition of Veteran is 'a person who has worn an ADF uniform for one day'. There is a clear difference between a Veteran who has been exposed to war or war-like operations than one who has simply worn a uniform.

This needs to be understood and the term 'Veteran' redefined accordingly: TO be acknowledged as a 'Veteran' a person must have served in war or on war-like operations.

It is concerning that this Commission fails to recognise nor does it acknowledge the outstanding work of the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). While it has its critics and is far from perfect, DVA provides a range of services and support to Veterans, limited only by the funds and other resources made available to it by Government. The focus should be on assisting improving DVA in its service delivery to Veterans rather than disbanding it and creating another system where services will be provided by several Government departments, including Defence. The Defence Department is not an appropriate vehicle to deal with Veterans matters. It is indeed arguable that this would be a conflict of interest and that it would detract from Defence's prime role of preparing for and fighting wars.

The Report appears to be primarily focused on Government cost saving rather than the needs of Veterans and their dependents. Again, this is an insult to those affected. It also paints the picture of a Government and a community that doesn't accept its responsibilities to acknowledge and care for those who have placed their lives on the line for to defend the Nation's ideals and values.

It seems the Commission has approached this review as an academic exercise with the intent of circumventing the real situation. Trendy terms such as 'wellness' and 'contemporary' indicate a failure to understand the wider and unique Veteran environment and the needs of both Veterans and their dependents. It also appears the Commission wants to strip-out or downgrade Veterans benefits based on a false premise that has been brought about by a lack of understanding and empathy for the Veteran's cause.

The Commission seems intent on removing the existing Gold Card provisions for Veterans. There appears a resentment that that this entitlement exists and that it is seen as a 'prize' to be won by those who have had it awarded. This is a gross insult to Veterans. If anything, the Gold Card should be awarded to all those who have served in war or on war-like service from the time they complete such service, not when they reach the age of 70 or have extensive war or war-like service injuries. This is the least the Country can do to recognise and show appreciation to those who have placed their lives and futures on the line for the Nation's well-being.

The provision for awarding a Gold Card to the spouses of deceased Veterans who it can be proven died of war-related injuries is unfair and arguably discriminatory. This provision needs to be reviewed with a view to awarding the Gold Card to the spouses of all deceased Veterans.

Lump sum payments to Veterans as one-off compensation for injuries sustained in service has numerous flaws. While some fiscal settlement for injuries may be justified, this area needs more study to ensure whatever the system, both the veteran and his or her dependents receive the care they need for the long term.

The report makes some credible attempt to streamline the way DVA conducts its business but much more needs to be done to make the system 'user-friendly'.

Much of this Report should be rejected by Government and indeed the Parliament, however, those aspects related to simplifying the administration of Veterans services and extending or improving the scope of services should be heeded.

The Veterans Review Board (DVA) is a credible and necessary tool of the DVA claims process and as such it should remain in its present role with like responsibilities and authority,

A Parliamentary Committee should be formed to review further Veterans' services.

INTRODUCTION

As a Veteran who proudly served the Nation in uniform for 24 years, including service as an infantry officer in Vietnam (1967-68), I feel compelled to express my serious concerns at the Draft Productivity Commission Report recently made available to the public and to Government.

Like many other Veterans, my initial reaction to the Report was and remains more than sceptical. I see numerous 'red flags' that indicate Veterans and their families are being disadvantaged and treated with contempt by the Commission, and if its Report is accepted as presented, by Government.

My interpretation of the Report is that it is academic in nature. It appears to be based on limited practical research and with limited engagement with or understanding of the principal stakeholders, the Veterans. And their families.

Regrettably, it has been apparent for the last few years that Government may be attempting to sidestep its responsibilities in respect to Veterans, while wanting the community to believe the contrary.

Ever since the re-defining of the word 'Veteran' from that of 'having served on active (war or war-like) service' to that of 'anyone who has worn a uniform for a day', has the status of and respect for Veterans been in decline at an official level. It seems the intention of Government is to remove any form of special recognition, treatment or consideration of Veterans, regardless of the fact they have been exposed, at the Government's behest, to environmental conditions and danger far beyond that

experienced by the general population. There appears to be a naïve and ill-conceived reluctance to differentiate between war service and service in a peace-time environment. In other words, Government wants all those who have served in uniform to be equal both in terms of status and entitlement.

If the Government accepts and acts upon the recommendations of this Report, albeit only in draft form, it will be doing the Veteran community a grave disservice; indeed, it will be acting immorally; it will be an insult to all those who have served in the armed forces, especially in war.

Rather than being focused on the needs of Veterans, the thrust of the Draft Report appears to be one of cost saving; something; a common theme for Government in today's political environment.

AWARENESS & UNDERSTANDING OF VETERANS' ISSUES

Most Veterans would not have even been aware that this Report was being compiled so I doubt there has been much input by Veterans, other than by Ex-Service Organisations (ESO) who, it might be argued, are not a true and certainly not a complete representation, despite the fact there are many of them. This is a major concern in itself as only Veterans really understand the issues they face both during and after service. One of the major problems with ESO is that, since Vietnam, but more particularly since our involvement in Timor, the number of ESO has grown substantially. While this has occurred with the best of intent, it has eroded the voice of Veterans, especially when it comes to matters like the Productivity Commission review of Veterans services, and with Government.

Prior to Vietnam, the RSL, was the principal voice of Veterans. As small number of other associations, such as Legacy, the TPI Association, the War Widows Guild and some Regimental Associations usually lent their support to the RSL's position on issues. Now, as unfortunate as it may be, the RSL has lost its credibility, its status with Veterans and I suspect, the community at large; this has left a serious void in the 'Veterans voice'. Given this situation, it is easy for the Productivity Commission to take a simplistic, uninformed approach to matters which have a serious, long term and perhaps devastating impact on Veterans and their families. It is certainly possible, given the fact there are very few WW11 Veterans still alive, and the Korean veterans are very small in number, to forget what 'conventional war' is all about. Even Vietnam was relatively contained and casualties were light, largely due to the use of helicopters for casualty evacuation and the fact the enemy did not have air, massed artillery or Naval gunfire support. Since Vietnam our servicemen and women have been involved only in small numbers with very narrow operational objectives compared to previous wars. Casualties, except perhaps in respect to the almost unquantifiable number allegedly suffering PTSD, have been exceptionally light.

Given this situation there is a very real danger we forget the real extent of the effects of war, instead focusing on t(he new term which seems to have arisen) 'contemporary Veterans'.

When planning the way forward for Veterans services, we need to consider the likelihood of being involved in a large-scale contemporary conflict with a high number of casualties both physical and mental. We must not allow ourselves to be restricted to 'brush-fire' campaigns where the bulk of the fighting is done by special forces, or others in very small numbers.

ERODING OF 'VETERAN' STATUS

It has been a concern for some time that Veterans issues are increasingly in danger of becoming a political point scoring and money-saving matter. This thread seems to run throughout this Report.

Until recently, the term 'Veteran' had status and respect. In the eyes of most, including Veterans, it meant someone who had served in war or on war-like service. This was an appropriate definition, given such service requires a greater involvement, significantly more exposure, personal risk, training, personal sacrifice and commitment. To now group people in this category with those who have simply worn a uniform' devalues the service rendered by those who have been at war. The term 'Veteran', in short, has lost its value.

It is reasonable to ask if this change was not deliberately intended as a start point for eroding the Veteran status, thereby enabling Government to scale back entitlements over time by stealth.

The Government needs to correct this situation by, again, redefining the term 'Veteran' to clearly differentiate between those who have served in war or on war-like operations and those who have simply worn a uniform.

The Productivity Commission seems to have taken a simplistic view of Veterans issues. It has, for example, suggested that 'an injury is an injury' no matter whether it occurred in war or in peace-time barracks. This is an absolute insult to Veterans who have served in combat operations and especially those who have been wounded by enemy fire.

When a service-person is assigned to a theatre of war or war-like service, it is because the Government has identified a need to protect the Nation's interest and in so doing is prepared to lose life. Any Military commander worth his salt understands that in war, casualties are likely, if not guaranteed to occur. Indeed, when planning operations, planners assess the number of casualties so they can plan logistic support such as field evacuations, casualty clearing stations and field ambulances, field hospitals and the like. Perhaps we have forgotten this since we have become more and more involved in small or 'special force' type operations such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

So, when considering prevention of injuries, we should not be applying the occupational health and safety principles that we would normally apply in a workshop, factory, or even in Military training situations in a peace-time environment.

Being 'injured' either directly or indirectly in war or on war-like service, especially if those injuries are as a result of a direct contact with the enemy, in which case 'wounded', not 'injured' is the appropriate term is a completely different context. For a start, the environment in which injury is sustained is completely different to that in non-war or war-like situation. It must be remembered that in war or on war-like service, the person causing the 'injury' was intent on killing the person victim; vastly different from just falling off the back of a truck. Thus, the environmental circumstances are entirely different, as are the possible consequences such as PTSD, in addition to the physically identifiable wound.

To align being wounded or even being injured in war or on war like service, with being injured in a peace-time environment is illogical, unfair, and unreasonable. It shows a complete lack of empathy and understanding of what war is like. It is also disrespectful to the victims, many of whom die well after the injuries have been sustained because of the life-changing circumstances of their experiences.

ROLE OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

The Department of Veterans Affairs is often, I believe, unfairly and unreasonably, maligned by some Veterans (and non-Veterans). Unfortunately, most of this criticism seems to originate with Veterans who have a somewhat misguided expectation that the community, and hence DVA owe them a life-time of unrestricted, open-ended debt both emotionally and physically. It is, I think, fair to say, most Veterans do not share this view. Yes, the community and the Government in particular, have a very clear responsibility to compensate Veterans in such areas as health care, rehabilitation and reasonable financial well-being but this is not unlimited. This point is acknowledged in the Report, but it is used to infer Veterans currently in receipt of entitlements are excessively compensated. This, I suggest is an invalid assessment and an insult to those who have served in war.

DVA does an excellent job in providing a wide range of services to Veterans as best it is able within its allocated budget and resources. It should be remembered that DVA has not been exempt from the Abbott Government imposed 'efficiency dividend' which has meant staffing reductions and other cost savings. If DVA is not doing enough, and this is arguably the case, it's not a DVA problem but a Government (political) problem.

Might I also suggest there are some in the political class who have little regard for Veterans, or the Military for that matter, and for this reason are not remotely concerned with ensuring DVA has the tools to do the job. This mind set needs to change.

Since the end of WW1, DVA has successfully implemented Veterans policies on behalf of Governments of both persuasions. In this time, it is fair to say, it has developed a deep understanding of Veterans issues resulting from two World Wars and numerous campaigns, including Korea, Malaya, Borneo, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Timor. Each of these has brought their own unique challenges in terms of physical and mental consequences from a changing operational environment.

In addition, DVA has been increasingly involved in the rehabilitation and compensation of injuries sustained by Defence personnel within the Australian environment. Just as importantly, it has been actively involved with the care of Veterans families, including those who have been killed in action or died from war-related injuries. The level of expertise required to deal with these situations is immense. Care must be taken to ensure it is not lost, which is likely if current responsibilities are removed and spread over numerous Government departments.

Moving responsibility from the current DVA arrangement can only result in a downgrading of services; Veterans and Veterans' families will suffer the consequences. There is much to be done in the Veteran space and no reasonable person would expect an overnight resolution. But, if the Government, in its wisdom, changes the commander half way through the battle, Veterans will suffer even more than they do now. We currently have a good vehicle in DVA; we need to stick with it, resource it better and give it the financial support it needs to do its job with maximum effectiveness

DEFENCE RESPONSIBILITIES

According to this Report, Defence will pick up much of the responsibility for Veteran care. While at first glance this might appear reasonable, given Defence was the employer of all Veterans and thus should have some ongoing responsibility for them. I suggest, however, this may only be the case in respect to short term rehabilitation and care where there is an opportunity and expectation that the Veteran will return to

Service duty. If this is not the case, then Defence must be removed from the equation in order to avoid a conflict of interest that will likely result from budget pressures and Defence's primary responsibility: is to prepare for and fight wars, as opposed to cleaning up afterwards.

There is no doubt Defence, like any other employers, has a duty of care to provide a safe workplace and when injuries do occur, to make good and/ or compensate or rehabilitate in some way. This is fine in peace-time but I doubt it applies on the battlefield to the extent inferred in this Report. Minimising casualties is always a key consideration of responsible Military commanders, but it's a fact (as stated by Field Marshall Lord Wavell of WW11 fame '...in war men (and women) die... ". The same applies to the wounded and he injured. So, let us not be too simplistic in aligning the civilian or peace-time environment with the realities of war and war-like service.

But even in the peace-time environment, once the employee leaves his employment then the options for meeting post-employment care responsibilities are limited and third parties must step up to the plate. With Veterans this is where DVA steps in and it does so very effectively.

For any third-party care programme to be effective, it must be driven by people with the knowledge, motivation, understanding and commitment to the special needs of those needing the care.

SIMPLISTIC, ACADEMIC APPROACH

The Productivity Commission Report has a certain 'smell' about it; it smacks of cost cutting. It appears to be a Report compiled by people with little first-hand knowledge of or empathy for Veterans' issues. While in preparing the Report, some discussion would undoubtedly have been held with selected sections of the Veteran Community, It is reasonable to question the depth and breadth of these discussions. There should be no doubt Veterans' issues are sensitive and discussion can easily become emotive. It is also a very complex issue and so requires the widest possible In-depth discussion with Ex-Service Organisations, Veterans and the public generally, without risking unnecessary delay in its findings and the actioning of those findings. If this Report is implemented without such dialogue and hasty decisions are made, there will likely be widespread and justified angst amongst the Veteran community. More importantly, Veterans will be seriously at risk of being disadvantaged which may well be further detrimental to their health, especially their mental health.

One of the most critical issues facing Veterans and one in which DVA has arguably failed in addressing, is that of Service and disability pensions, all of which have lost their purchasing power by not keeping up with inflation and the cost of living. The TPI (Totally and Permanently Incapacitated) pension, for example, has, I understand lost 40% of its intended purchasing power since it was first introduced.

As best I can determine, the Productivity Commission has not picked up on this issue. Indeed, there is comment in the Report that infers the contrary: that in the opinion of the Commission, some pensions and other entitlements are excessive.

Another example of where Veterans have been and remain disadvantaged is the problematic DFRDB superannuation system that, while not part of this review, has been before the Parliament for more than a decade but seems to be too hot to handle.

Meanwhile thousands of Veterans live on the breadline due to the payments available under this scheme having lost purchasing power. Again, it appears, Government wants to avoid this issue because of its cost implications.

The Government knows that the mental health issue is a significant problem amongst young, so-called, 'contemporary' Veterans and indeed the wider community. This issue appears to be political dynamite and one could be forgiven for thinking this is why it is getting so much attention., perhaps at the expense of other priorities and groups. Funds and resources are unquestionably needed to address mental health but this must not be at the expense of other services and entitlements.

Re-engineering or restructuring any organisation is a common strategy for cost saving in any enterprise or system. If carried out astutely it creates the impression of creating enterprise-wide efficiency dividends but it's really about saving money. This is how this Report, albeit in Draft, comes across. The Report appears focused on stripping out benefits and entitlements while creating the false impression it is improving responsiveness to Veterans' needs.

The Report has embraced trendy modern terms such as 'wellness' and 'contemporary'; terms that conveniently change the focus of the Report. Instead of facing and addressing the fundamental issue of physical and mental injuries sustained in war or on war-like operations of the real situation: injuries, the effect of which, often do not come to light until years after they have been sustained.

The Report relies heavily on statistics, graphs, figures, etc to present the case for change. This academic approach tends to mask the real situation. It may help the Commission's intent to save money but does nothing to assist in addressing shortcomings in the current system.

'NO DISADVANTAGE'

Notably the Report says 'no Veteran currently in receipt of benefits will be disadvantaged'; really! In whose eyes? Governments do not have a good reputation when it comes to trust and telling the unabridged truth. Veterans will need more than just a throw-away line or two to convince them this is the case. Indeed, the suggestion that the Gold Card be removed is an immediate disadvantage to those who are in receipt of it: no disadvantage?

The fact is, those responsible for interpreting these matters will likely, intentionally or otherwise, use confusing data to prove their 'no disadvantage' formulae but in a practical sense it will likely be later shown to be unrealistic, false or misleading. There can be no doubt that if the recommendations of this report are implemented, many Veterans stand to be disadvantaged; there is just no way this will not occur.

THE GOLD CARD

It is a major concern that the authors of this Report target the Gold Card by inferring it is seen as a 'prize'; it is anything but.

The Report also infers that there are excessive benefits or entitlements given to those in possession of a Gold Card; eg access to private hospitals and to treatment for health issues not directly related to the recognised injury or health issue. Not only is this an insult to Veterans by inferring they should get less by way of benefits or the standard of those benefits, but that they do not deserve special consideration as a consequence of their service, more particularly war and war-like service.

This attitude may have been 'encouraged' by the new definition of 'Veteran' that does not differentiate between war and non-war service. Clearly this is unacceptable.

The argument over the Gold Card of course has wider implications than just the Veteran. It also impacts on the awarding of the Card to war widows.

It will be strongly argued by those involved with supporting the widows of Veterans that all widows, whether their partners died of war related injuries or not, should receive a Gold Card. (refer below).

There should be no doubt in anyone's mind that the Nation is indebted to the Veteran community. Some will say that war and war-like service is a price we pay as a community to keep us safe. While this may be true, looking after Veterans needs after such service, is also a price we must pay.

In my view the Nation should at least accept responsibility for Veterans health following war or war-related service. To this end, every individual who has participated in such circumstances should receive free health cover (a Gold Card) or the rest of his or her life. There is no justification for this provision to apply to those who have not served on war or war-like service. Most importantly, the health care provided to Veterans with war or war-like service should be at the top end. These people have done more than most in the Nation's interest; this needs to be recognised.

GOLD CARD FOR SPOUSES OF DECEASED VETERANS

This Report appears to almost ignore the needs of spouses when the Veteran passes. Currently the Gold Card is made available to spouses where it can be proved the Veteran died from war-related injuries. Those same spouses also receive a War Widows Pension.

This provision is discriminatory in the sense that it is often difficult to prove that a war injury was the cause of death even though this may be the case. The other aspect of this is that the Veteran's after-service life in many cases may have been determined, to a large extent, by his or her war or war-like service. This may cause social and relationship problems which the spouse has had to endure for many years, yet no compensation can be justified because of a lack of tangible proof that the Veteran's service was in any way responsible.

If the Government is genuinely serious about caring for Veterans' dependents, it should seriously consider awarding the Gold Card to the spouses of all Veterans who have served in war or on war-like operations.

LUMP SUM PAYMENTS FOR INJURIES

The Report discusses lump sum payments instead of ongoing pension-type compensation for injuries. This has the potential to disadvantage Veterans and their families, especially when large amounts of money are given to those Veterans not equipped to handle it. This area needs more work to determine a fair and equitable system but one that ensures the protection of both the Veteran and his/her dependants, especially children. It might be that a system of part lump sum, part pension would be a viable option but, again, provided dependants are safeguarded.

Some might argue that it is not the Government or DVA role to ensure the welfare of dependants. This could not be further from the truth, especially when those dependants were the Veterans responsibility at the time of his/her deployment on war or war-like service. Dependants are very much part of the equation.

There is no doubt this particular aspect is complex and an equitable solution will be most difficult. It is critical, however, that dependants' long-term needs be considered as well as those of the Veteran.

To place a large sum of money (and we are talking hundreds of thousands of dollars) in front of a Veteran suffering from injuries that may include mental injuries, is problematic, especially when the Veteran or his/her dependents are not familiar with handling money in large sums. There are examples of Veterans 'blowing' large amounts irresponsible and then dependants, possibly also the Veteran, suffering financial hardship afterwards. This must be avoided.

It may be there is an opportunity here to develop a matrix of options where some financial benefit is in the best interest of those affected. As a general rule, however, a pension option supported by other benefits (services) designed to support them is the best option.

Whatever the solution, it must be remembered that in a great many cases the Veterans' dependents suffer either directly or indirectly as a consequence of the Veterans service, especially when this includes war or war-like service. This applies not just to Veterans who had dependants at the time of his or her deployment but to those who acquire dependants even after some well after deployment.

IMPROVING THE SYSTEM

There is no doubt the current DVA system is complex; understanding it is difficult for the average person who does not deal with it on a daily basis. Further, there is confusion as to what piece of legislation, regulation or policy applies to whom and when. Specific aspects of the current system that warrant attention are:

- Simplifying the legislation covering Veterans entitlements under a single Act of Parliament.
- Simplifying (reducing) the number of compensation schemes.
- Simplifying access to the Veterans support system, in particular claims processing.
- Making DVA more accessible, especially in regional centres.
- Speeding up the claim settlement procedure.
- Removing the onus on ex-service organisations for claims initiation and processing. It should not be up to volunteers to perform this task; it is a Government responsibility. As it stands, the success of a claim is largely dependent on the experience and expertise of the volunteer processing the claim. This undoubtedly means some who should be receiving benefits miss out, and the reverse. It may be Veterans and ESO's can be of assistance in this process, however the Government needs to provide them with appropriate training, funding and other resources. There is passing mention in the Report of establishing Veteran 'hubs'; this should be a major initiative to be pursued by DVA so that the Veteran has a 'one stop shop' to address all their and their dependents needs.

The Draft Report attempts to address some of these issues. To me, this is the only positive aspect of the entire Report.

VETERANS REVIEW BOARD

The Veterans Review Board (VRB) has been a very effective tool in assisting the management of Veterans issues, especially with issues that are controversial or unclear at face value. The VRB is made up principally of Veterans. There is no-one better equipped to understand and consider issues of concern to other Veterans; they have been there and done that, and they are in a solid position to confirm or otherwise the nature and extent of Veterans and dependents claims.

Disbanding or reducing the role and authority of the VRB would be a grave injustice to Veterans and their dependents, to Government and to the DVA process.

CONCLUSIONS

This Report presents a simplistic view of Veterans issues. It's as if it is aimed at appeasing the Commission's political masters. The Report lacks empathy and understanding of Veterans issues, and overall it is grossly flawed.

It also seems to me there may be an underlying intent by Government to, by stealth, abrogate its responsibilities to veterans and their dependants by reducing or realigning costs in caring for them.

If this is the case, it follows that Government would endeavour to find synergies that will enable its existing agencies that provide services to the wider public, to also provide services to Veterans., thus avoiding duplication, and maximising economies of scale. This intent appears to be borne out in the Report. The problem with this is the unique circumstances confronted by Veterans, especially those incapacitated through war and war-like service, and the special, if not unique, care and understanding required as a consequence of this service, will likely be lost in the mire. Government must make a greater effort to understand and acknowledge the uniqueness of Veterans' service, otherwise Veterans stand to be significantly disadvantaged.

This Report gives little credit to DVA that, as an organisation, has treated Veterans with respect, dignity, empathy and understanding over many years. It is not appropriate or viable to disband DVA with the intent of tasking other Government departments to manage Veterans issues, certainly not Defence where there would likely be a conflict of interest. Instead, the Government should be boosting the resources and funding of DVA; improving on rather than axing a credible, hard-working and productive organisation. While the report indicates no Veteran will be disadvantaged by the recommendations of this Report, it is difficult to accept that this will be the case. Governments are not known for their honesty in such matters and any commitment along these lines must be treated with the utmost caution.

This Report is based on the new definition of 'Veteran' being anyone 'someone who has worn a uniform for one day', rather than someone who has served in war or on war-like service. This might be a definition convenient to Government consumed by the buzz-word 'equality', but it is an insult to those veterans who have witnessed the effects of such service. The Report also appears to have an air of resentment about it; Veterans appear to be seen as malingers on the public purse. If this is the case than it's more than just a sad day; it's a black mark on our society.

This Report has many failings but in particular it fails to:

- Recognise the true extent of war and war-like service and the associated consequences., as opposed to simply 'serving in uniform' in a peace-time situation.

- Give adequate recognition of the suffering and needs of Veterans' dependents.
- Acknowledge the work of DVA and the improvements made in the manner in which it administers the current legislation within the limits of its resources and funding.
- Fully articulate (some attempt has been made) how the current system will be improved in terms of providing a better understanding, ease of access and responsiveness in respect to veterans' services.

Lump sum payments to Veterans to compensate for injuries is an easy way out for Government and should be avoided in principle. While there may be a case for some financial compensation in some circumstances, such provision is fraught with danger in terms of the long-term needs of veterans and their dependents.

The Report infers that the Gold Card currently available to Veterans should be discontinued. This would be a grave disservice to Veterans and must not be accepted by Government. Indeed, there is reasonable argument that the Gold Card be extended to the spouse of all deceased Veterans and that it also be automatically made available to all Veterans who have served in war or on war-like operations from the time they complete such service.

It would be immoral of Government to side-step its responsibilities for Veterans and their dependents which it will do if it accepts and acts on this Report.

To most veterans the treatment afforded them in this Report will be seen as shameful. It is unfair, unreasonable, disrespectful and, quite frankly, immoral.

The VRB is an effective and essential tool in the DVA arsenal. It has an excellent record of caring for Veterans in a responsible, unbiased and mature manner. To do away with the VRB in its current role and with its current authority would be a grave injustice to Veterans, their dependents, to Government and to DVA.

If the Government accepts all the recommendations in this Report, it must expect an unprecedented backlash from Veterans. Further, it is reasonable to think large parts of the wider community will come out in support of Veterans and their dependents. This might well be embarrassing for the Government.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended:

- This Report be treated with caution by Government. There are many parts of this Report that are unfair and unjust in terms of the treatment of Veterans and their dependents.
- Those aspects of the Report that have merit, such as simplifying the administration of Veterans, exploring the educational needs of dependents, improving transition arrangements from Service to civilian life, improving mental health understanding and assistance, improving funding arrangements, etc should be actively pursued. In consultation with the Veteran community.
- DVA should continue its responsibilities for the administration of all Veterans matters. On no account should Defence be given any responsibility for managing Veterans post-service, nor should responsibilities be passed to other Government departments and mixed with their responsibilities to the general public.
- Lump sum payments to Veterans is not a preferred option but if they must occur care must be taken to safeguard the long-term interests of Veterans and their dependents.

- The Gold Card must continue to be available to Veterans who qualify. The possibility of extending the entitlement to the Gold Card should be actively considered. This should include extending the awarding of the card to all spouses of deceased Veterans and to all those who have had war or war-like service, from the time they return from that service.
- The VRB should continue in its present role and with its current level of, responsibility and authority.

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