



Royal Commission Update - Townsville Day 35 - 22 June 2022

RSL References

John Caligari:

- ESO fracturing and lack of serious policy development - leadership is needed at the higher levels in order to have policy impact at the lower/grassroot
 - Did have an RSL that was in this place in the past. Prospect of the RSL doing this again if they can pull themselves together. But there needs to be a leader in this space
 - Rivalries among ESOs - i.e. Vietnam Veterans' organisations that developed when rejected by RSL - will always be rivalries, but need leadership to stop this
- ESORT getting together with old men thinking they are the voice, we won't do this effectively
- Peak Body with professional policy development backup as a possibility?
 - RSL has already done this, and can be again - RSL is not the RSL - There are National level, State branches, sub-Branches that do well, States that struggle
 - If RSL could be changed with the times, instead of creating a new structure, we already have the RSL
 - Needs to get respect back, unify, and the community is screaming out for that
 - If we have small pockets, special interests, rivalries, we won't get there

Positive:

- Oasis Centre Employment program - MOU with RSL Queensland employment services
- RSL is looking very hard to look at what it has to do to be relevant and is working hard to address these things

Negative:

- RSL has elements that are not relevant to veterans today in some areas - i.e. pokies, alcohol, bingo, not aware of service today
- Missing the National Voice at the RSL

General remarks

- Consultation with ESOs and the lack of professional policy development capacity within ESOs has been discussed at length in the past two days. For instance, The Hon Darren Chester MP was questioned along the lines of the following by Commission Douglas today:

Role of community and ESOs

- Conscious of the role ESOs can play in the space with veterans - how can we partner to provide

- seed funding for innovative services
- Consultation process in the veterans' space is very important
- Political problem trying to assess the reaction of ESOs and the veteran community in implementing reform - sometimes Government has to make difficult decisions (haven't been made)
 - Commissioners have been provided with evidence that the fragmented nature of ESOs and their lack of sophisticated policy development capability makes it difficult to consult properly
 - Hard to get unified view on these issues or ones informed by sophisticated policy development - difficult to get good quality feedback - has not pursued improvements on these points
 - ESORT can provide good feedback, but not always complex policy advice
- Evidence from Assistant Secretary that there are no criteria for choosing ESORT members, that there is no framework for assessment of performance, and is essentially a job for life
- Royal Commission is a good method to unite veteran community going forward
- Chester MP was questioned extensively regarding harmonisation of legislation - the Commissioners seem to be targeting this element

9:am - 1:30pm - The Hon Darren Chester MP, Federal Member for Gippsland, Former Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel

Preliminary questions

- Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Defence Personnel 5th March 2018 - July 2021
- Arrangement of portfolio is matter for prime minister - specific responsibility matters for personnel - recruitment to service then transition, working closely with Minister of Defence
- Statement in response to questions from Royal Commission. Statement says role was the pinnacle of career
- Response to Request for Information to the Royal Commission was a little late due to the election campaign
- May not have provided every document to the Royal Commission, but happy those provided are sufficient- will provide additional information if it is found

Role of Veterans' Affairs

- To listen to the ESOs about how to solve veterans' issues - wanted things to be evidence-based and use trial/pilot programs etc.
- Is it responsibility of the Government to find the funds to ensure the required services are provided? - There are always competing pressures, i.e. budgetary processes
- Had more freedom being in outer cabinet to advocate on behalf of veterans to colleagues in cabinet and the wider party - Champion of Veterans - inferring that if he was in cabinet, things would have been more restricted in terms of advocating for innovative programs and services etc.

Role of community and ESOs

- Conscious of the role ESOs can play in the space with veterans - how can we partner to provide seed funding etc. for the good work that's already happening in the community -
- Good things in the community are happening, how can government support that i.e. assistance dogs programs, which then became government funded
- Constantly sought advice from ESOs - particularly peak organisations - and would then advocate on their behalf

Legislation and harmonisation

- This is a priority issue for the veteran community - urgent and important - not sure what form this should take, but believed it was worth of pursuing, despite the enormous amount of work that would be required
- Sheer complexity of the system can lead to detrimental effects on mental health - not sure if this is a direct causal relationship to a death by suicide
- Complexity leads to delays and errors, claims being rejected when they shouldn't be - harmonisation to address this should be continued
- Statement of Principles is a good thing - showed intent to simplify system
- Money is required for this - money has to come from somewhere - didn't want to impose a greater tax burden

Productivity Commission report

- Most important report during his time as Minister - Broad and detailed, helped to inform Department's thinking - incredibly thorough inquiry
- Identified where we were good and also areas of concern
- Harmonisation recommendations were not ready to be taken to the Finance Minister or AG to say this change needs to occur in this way - a lot of work was needed
- Not necessarily the Minister's Office that would implement a recommendation, falls onto the Department i.e. DVA
- In principle acceptance of a recommendation can also be considered, while the intent of a recommendation can also be implemented i.e. recommendation is not implemented, but the interpreted intent of the recommendation can be implemented
- Consulted with ESOs on the recommendations of the report, considered views of subject matter experts in DVA
- No final response released by the previous Government - received briefings from Department, ESOs etc. - didn't think he needed additional information
- Secured \$386 million to address recommendations accepted by the Government

Harmonisation recommendations of the report

- No reason could be remembered for rejecting Recommendations 8.1, 18.1 or 19.1 re. harmonisation or for not funding them - didn't have enough information on the Recommendations to be unequivocal in that view - couldn't get Treasury and Finance on taking that forward - still no decision from the Australian Government on these recommendations
- Needed to get agreement of veteran community about what it would support - reservations among ESOs about what it might mean for individuals who might be worse off - wasn't in position to recommend funding
- Needed more work - costings, consultation, funding models, reform models etc. - legislative reform roadmap was worth pursuing - should have been a reason to begin work as early as possible
- Consultation was done through the ESORT processes - desire to simplify legislation and harmonise - considered grandfathering as part of any reform
- Concerns re. entitlements being taken away or never obtained in the first place because of the reform
- Legislation reform map - indication of Government support - plan describing how to achieve intent of recommendations 8.1, 18.1, 19.1
 - Would include timeframes, details about consultation, what would be in and what would be out, indication of costs, anticipated benefits - detailed brief
 - Would be done by advice from ESOs, legal experts, DVA SMEs
 - First asked for in May 2021 - don't know why it hasn't been produced yet - i.e. 2 years just to ask for the road map
- External consultants have been brought in to help with the road map
- Were the benefits of options for reform examined? Solutions to problems identified? No specific direction, but his understanding things were happening
- First internal workshop to consider these recommendations didn't occur until December 2021

- Difficulties with enacting reform include:
 - Limited appetite from Government to give effect to changes
 - Some reforms would require legislation – not a reason to not enact legislation
 - Limited opportunities in 2019-21 to simplify legislation due to limited sitting period
- Government after 3 years had not done the groundwork to make a decision on supporting legislative change recommendations
- Would like to be further progressed as a Government on this issue today – doesn't agree Government has failed veterans in regards to this issue

Role of community and ESOs

- Conscious of the role ESOs can play in the space with veterans – how can we partner to provide seed funding for innovative services
- Consultation process in the veterans' space is very important
- Political problem trying to assess the reaction of ESOs and the veteran community in implementing reform – sometimes Government has to make difficult decisions (haven't been made)
 - Commissioners have been provided with evidence that the fragmented nature of ESOs and their lack of sophisticated policy development capability makes it difficult to consult properly
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DVA

- Was not aware DVA had a resourcing problem to be able to achieve the Productivity Commission's suggested reform
 - DVA has a high degree of expertise, and where necessary, could ask for external assistance to undertake the work
- Staff turnover should be minimised wherever possible
 - Ongoing staff is desirable, but some contract staff are desirable to maintain flexibility – ASL staffing caps has made this difficult – contractors are more expensive than ongoing staff to the taxpayer
 - No benefits for anyone that DVA is being subjected to ASL caps
 - Should have been a model that looked at demand, and this dictated the level of staffing
- Seems that an opinion was formed that DVA could be reduced in size – new initiatives were implemented which increased demand – staffing was never increased to match this new demand – staffing level stuck at 2017 levels
- Role of DVA is changing – not just assessing compensation, no longer provides health services, does commemoration – if had time again, would drive self-help in the community, i.e. among ESOs
- Mr Chester promoted additional funding for claims backlogs, staffing and implementing Productivity Commission

Claims processing

- Claims have been increasing for more than three years – this has contributed to the backlog
- DVA victim of its own success, such as identifying more veterans and encouraging serving Members to make claims – weren't sure that these strategies would work – deliberately pursued these strategies, and these should/could have been predicted
- Resources were not put into the backend of the MyService portal
- Didn't believe the backlog would last longer than the forward estimates – no effective modelling – Department of Finance was provided, but this failed – so the Government implemented temporary

solutions, such as supplementary funding – after a period of years it should have been assumed that the problem would be ongoing, and therefore required a long-term solution

- Additional effort is required to reduce the backlog of claims

Veterans' Recognition Act

- Adversarial stance previously taken by statutory decision makers – discouraged people from making claims
- Section 7 which deals with beneficial application of the Act is important, but often misunderstood – has been good for beneficial for the application of various veterans' entitlements acts
- The Act contains was the one most likely to assist in recognition and positive reflection on service passed during Mr Chester's time in Government
- 100,000 veterans registered for package that went with the Act

Joint Transition Authority

- Not all recommendations (4 of 5) from the Productivity Commission relating to the JTA have been implemented, or even accepted, by the Government
- This is despite updated Government response says the recommendation has been implemented

Commissioner's questions

- Census questions re. veterans brought in, with support of DVA and ESOs
 - Will be able to better direct services, i.e., through a heat map
 - Will inform future decision making
- Productivity Commission report released July 2019 – Yes
- DVA asked to prepare roadmap in May 2021 – Yes
- Royal Commission established in July 2021 – Yes
- No firm timeline was set by the Minister – Yes
- Additional funding required for DVA – Would like a fund for innovation to sit within DVA
- Is an increase of the ASL cap required – Yes, but this is being addressed through budgets

2:30pm – 4:30pm – John Caligari AO DSC, Chair, The Oasis Townsville

The Oasis Centre

- Need for a mechanism for younger veterans to be identified and brought into veteran organisations and ESOs in Townsville – wanted to have a kiosk to make this happen
- Doesn't need to be in one single location – more about guiding people to the correct ESO
- Population in Townsville of serving members, veterans and family members is conservatively 40,000
 - About 600 of ADF who transition each year, transition from Townsville – 200-250 in round terms, leave ADF and stay in Townsville
- Main mission is to have a thriving, respected vibrant and well supported ex-ADF community enhancing the economic prosperity of Townsville
- Goals of the Oasis include a family friendly, welcoming environment that facilitates social connections, facilitating access to services and facilities, a rewarding experience for staff, a culture that supports veterans
- We prevent mental health problems and suicide through connection, at the home base of the Oasis, through grants, funding and community support
- Services:
 - Referrals often include information sharing and organisations/service providers that understand Defence members/veterans – once a referral is made, keep in touch with person and service

- provider
 - All people at the Oasis are trained in Mental Health First Aid
 - Connections program - 1000 people using the facility every month
 - Employment program - MOU with RSL Queensland employment services
 - Life Plan program - Stepping this up to help ADF members plan their lives long-term
- Reaching out to those who won't engage but could benefit - can be too proud or too entrenched - only person who can pull them out is their mates
- No reporting to DVA re. \$5million provided to construct centre - Oasis conducting its own analysis
- Operating costs of the Oasis not met by DVA
- Until mid-2020, Oasis was funded by sponsorships and donations. On July 2020, received contract from Northern Queensland Health Network to implement enduring campaigns following on from Operation Compass - then also received funding to extend Operation Compass - then 4-year, \$250,000 p.a. from QLD government to run the employment program
- Effort of administration of grants and funding takes a lot of resources i.e. reporting obligations
- Costs Oasis around \$1 million to run its services each year - when funding ceases, Oasis may not be able to continue without additional funding - torture trying to do this all the time - living grant to contract

Transition

- We do this too late for serving veterans - usually will only access transition services once they have filled out the forms intending to leave
- Should be a responsibility at command level of ADF

Operation Compass

- Intentionally placed in Townsville - National suicide prevention trial for veterans and their families to be conducted in Townsville - set up through PM of the time - began as 'ex-ADF suicide prevention trial'
- Put in place to trial different programs that sought to reduce rates of suicide and increase wellbeing of ex-ADF community, through connection to life in Townsville and try to find valuable initiatives for the veteran community and make them sustainable
- Tried to get suicide out of the title - removed stigma - difficult for serving and ex-serving members to talk about suicide, but it is getting better
- Used the Black Dog Institute as a mentoring support
- Multi-level systems approach to suicide prevention - took hundreds of ideas, and rolled them up together into six campaigns
 - Used LifeSpan systems approach - created an eight-pronged approach for Operation Compass
- Did not always utilise evidence-based programs, so they wanted to find new initiatives where there was no evidence base for it
- Governance structure with a Steering Committee (Open Arms, Defence Families, Police, Health), project management team, an Advisory Group - more veterans formed part of the advisory as the program went on
- #CheckYourMates campaign - adopted by DVA Australia-wide - produced social media and videos, went viral
- Has been good connection with young males, and those that were medically discharged
- Ongoing needs for the veterans' community include:
 - Need to involve the whole community
 - Health promotion is the key - trying to come upstream of the problem
 - Connections are very valuable
 - Veterans need to find a single safe place - don't want to retell their stories - this includes with referrals where possible
- Need to have cultural competency of veterans - need to understand the people you are talking to

Veterans' Wellbeing Centres

- Analysis of benefits are ongoing
- WVC Network meetings share knowledge, progress, and information about what's going, short presentation from DVA on useful programs DVA is conducting
- DVA is doing its own analysis of the VWCs through Australian Health Associates - has not cost the VWCs yet
- DVA has not yet provided guidance on how these centres can be sustainable
- Thinks we need 17 VWCs across Australia, lining up against ADF Transition Centres inside the barracks - create a bridge from inside the wire to outside the wire
- Wellbeing centres should be funded by DVA for operational costs
- VWCs should operate on consistent principles, with certain functions that are the same - but operations can be tailored to specific circumstances

ESOs

- Doesn't think there are too many ESOs in Australia, as long as they are doing the right thing
- Doesn't think there is enough service provision - doesn't think there's overlap - even if they offer the same things, they offer for a different demographic
- Main challenges facing ESOs are getting in younger veterans, getting volunteers, and getting funding
- Help veterans get together and forge connection with each other - ethos of team among ex-service members - emphasise need for adapting identity to the civilian community
- ESO fracturing and lack of serious policy development - leadership is needed at the higher levels in order to have policy impact at the lower/grassroot
 - Did have an RSL that was in this place in the past. Prospect of the RSL doing this again if they can pull themselves together. But there needs to be a leader in this space
 - Rivalries among ESOs - i.e. Vietnam Veterans' organisations that developed when rejected by RSL - will always be rivalries, but need leadership to stop this
- Accreditation process - could be a useful tool - could be levels of ESO - many orgs with well-intentioned people don't have governance background and can fall into trouble - support for governance, guidance, reporting, verification etc.
- ESORT getting together with old men thinking they are the voice, we won't do this effectively
- Peak Body with professional policy development backup
 - RSL has already done this, and can be again - RSL is not the RSL - There are National level, State branches, sub-Branches that do well, States that struggle
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Operation Navigator

- Life planning for 5-10 years for ADF personnel on their first posting to Townsville

General issues

- Veterans need to feel safe and respected to love themselves after the damage it is possible that service can do
- Is there a divide between commissioned officers and NCOs? Does this carry over after transition?
 - It can. There will always be some friction between different levels of authority
 - Service is about orders - there is some freedom when leaving
 - ESOs can help in this aspect
- If there is a requirement to refer to a service where there is no service to refer to, then there is no service to refer to
- Mainstream organisations providing services need to be better equipped to deal with veteran-specific services