




Speech By
Bart Mellish

MEMBER FOR ASPLEY

Record of Proceedings, 26 October 2021

QUEENSLAND VETERANS' COUNCIL BILL

 **Mr MELLISH** (Aspley—ALP) (5.10 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Queensland Veterans' Council Bill 2021. Firstly, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all members of the committee and the secretariat for their work in considering the bill, particularly the chair, the member for Mansfield. I also extend my thanks and appreciation to the many organisations and individuals who took the time to make submissions in relation to the bill. I very much thank the Premier for bringing forward this bill, which I am very happy to speak to as our assistant minister for veterans affairs.

The bill will establish the Queensland Veterans' Council as a new statutory body with governance responsibility primarily for three functions: to manage Anzac Square; to administer the Anzac Day Trust; and to provide advice to the Queensland government on veterans matters. All three of these tasks are vitally and equally important to support our veterans. Consolidating these functions into one statutory body enables better coordination and oversight of veterans matters in Queensland.

As we all know, Anzac Square, the Shrine of Remembrance, the eternal flame and the memorial gallery play such an important role in many services throughout the year—not only on Anzac Day and the lead-up to it—and are well loved across the state. Having a formal body made up of veterans overseeing all of this is crucial to ensuring the square maintains its status, its relevance and its dignity well into the future. As part of Brisbane City Council handing over responsibility of Anzac Square to the state government, we could have easily just rolled its management into existing departmental structures, but we want veterans to have a say because the appearance, operations and future of our Shrine of Remembrance, the galleries and parklands should not solely be up to people like us in this chamber and our successors or local councillors. Veterans should have a say, and this bill will do just that. This revered space is too important not to guarantee its role in honouring the memory of those who served our country and those who died doing so.

It continues our commitment to the square, including our contribution of more than \$14 million to the 2019 Anzac Square restoration when the heritage sandstone was enhanced, historic statues and trees were protected, ponds were repaired and undercroft galleries were upgraded. I was very pleased that this year we were able carry out Anzac Day services broadly as per usual across the state, including at Anzac Square in particular. Very few states were able to do this, but thanks to the great work of every Queenslanders and the leadership of the Premier, the health minister and the Chief Health Officer, Queenslanders were all able to pay their respects in person.

Regarding the second function of the Veterans' Council which this bill will establish, the Anzac Day Trust will continue to perform the role it currently does and is unchanged as to its operations with regard to how its funding is allocated, and that is important. Some submissions to the committee raised concerns about what impact establishing the Queensland Veterans' Council may have on the Anzac Day Trust Fund. The Anzac Day Trust Fund was originally established in 1964. The Anzac Day Trust Fund has been continued under the current Anzac Day Act 1995. It provides annual payments to institutions, organisations or associations to assist and support ex-service men and women and their dependants.

In my time as assistant minister for veterans affairs I have met with and spoken to many veterans and veterans organisation across the state, and I know how important the Anzac Day Trust Fund is in supporting the veterans community. Currently, the trust fund receives funding from the state government in accordance with a formula prescribed in section 13 of the 1995 act. The Queensland Veterans' Council Bill does not amend the quantum of funding provided to the Anzac Day Trust Fund each year.

Under the formula, the Queensland government will provide funding of over \$1.4 million to the Anzac Day Trust this year, but we have committed additional funding to the Anzac Day Trust Fund for the last few years. COVID-19 has had a marked impact on the veterans community. In 2020, as we all know, Anzac Day services across Australia were restricted, with people being encouraged to stand in their driveways at dawn instead of attending the usual various commemorative activities. The Premier committed an additional \$1 million over three annual funding rounds to support veterans affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and for ex-service organisations to conduct COVID-safe commemorative events. To support the veterans community further we have the Queensland Remembers Grant Program, and I look forward to seeing them progress as we go through. It is clear from the provisions in the bill that funding to the Anzac Day Trust Fund cannot be used to support Anzac Square; nor can it be used to support the operations of the Queensland Veterans' Council.

The final function of the bill, and one which is in no way less important than the other two functions I mentioned, establishes that the new Veterans' Council will be an important source of advice that the government can draw upon when we are considering matters that affect veterans. It has been a tough 2021 for many veterans. Some veterans I speak to have told me that a combination of COVID, the Afghanistan withdrawal, the Brereton report and now the royal commission into defence and veteran suicide has made for a very difficult period in their life. I am glad to see the federal government has agreed to longstanding calls for a royal commission to be established in July this year.

Where we can provide feedback to the federal government, in particular on future issues and inquiries like this, I see the Queensland Veterans' Council playing an important role. Whilst of course we cannot and should not supplant the primary role of the federal government in this space, the Queensland Veterans' Council will contribute to bettering the lives of veterans in Queensland and promote better decision-making on veterans matters in our state.

Another suggestion that was made by submitters to the committee was that the chairperson of the Queensland Veterans' Council should be a veteran. By not prescribing that the chairperson must be a veteran the bill provides the opportunity to appoint a range of people, including a widow of a veteran, a partner of a veteran, a child of a veteran or another non-veteran member, and that is important. The amendments proposed to be moved by the Attorney-General during consideration in detail will further strengthen veteran representation on the Queensland Veterans' Council by ensuring that at least half of the council must be veterans and that the government 'must' instead of 'may' establish a veterans reference group. We have taken on board feedback on the bill and we are improving on it.

The opposition's statement of reservation questions the appropriateness of paying remuneration to members of the Veterans' Council, implying that fair remuneration to these veterans and the other members of the council should not be provided on the basis that it may 'impact on their ability to provide unbiased advice and compromise their impartiality'. That is a ridiculous suggestion. We recognise that members of government bodies provide a significant contribution to the community through their participation on these bodies. You would not say that a board member for Queensland Rail or the Port of Townsville is compromised because they are being paid for being on the board. If we want the Queensland Veterans' Council to take veterans matters seriously, we need to take them seriously. We should not ask them to do their work for free, as the opposition would have us do.

In the remaining time allotted I cannot try to understand the opposition's amendments because it is clear they have not put in the work into them. I do commend them for trying to improve the bill, but their amendments are unworkable and would result in fewer veterans being represented instead of more, which is the opposite of their intention. Their amendments would reduce the minimum requirements of veterans representation on the Queensland Veterans' Council and veterans reference group to one third of that which the government is proposing in our bill as amended. They also want to remove Brisbane City Council from the group entirely, not allowing them to have a say in the future of Anzac Square.

In fact, their amendments go even further. The LNP amendments remove the area of heritage conservation from the council. This is a significant concern given the heritage value of Anzac Square to the people of Queensland and the need to ensure its ongoing existence for generations to come. Veterans and the veterans community deserve better than the incomplete and counterproductive amendments from the opposition.

The Queensland Veterans' Council Bill is a significant piece of legislation that demonstrates the Premier and her government's commitment to our veterans and the broader veterans community. I look forward to seeing this bill passed. I look forward to seeing the Queensland Veterans' Council play a significant role in the future of the veterans community here in Queensland. I commend the bill to the House.