




Speech By  
**Brent Mickelberg**

**MEMBER FOR BUDERIM**

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### **QUEENSLAND VETERANS' COUNCIL BILL**

 **Mr MICKELBERG** (Buderim—LNP) (5.40 pm): Before I start, I want to associate myself with the comments of the member for Keppel in relation to Legacy and I, too, should disclose that I am a Legacy ambassador and also a member of a number of other veterans organisations as declared on my register of members' interests.

The Queensland Veterans' Council Bill is a missed opportunity in my view. It is a missed opportunity for the Queensland state government to do more to support the welfare of veterans and their families. It is a missed opportunity for the state government to tackle veterans homelessness, veterans mental health and the challenges that many veterans face when transitioning from military service. It is a missed opportunity to ensure that the spouses and children of Queensland veterans are not disadvantaged in relation to their employment, their schooling or when seeking care in Queensland hospitals, just to name a few.

At the outset of my contribution to this debate, I want to acknowledge that in Australia there is considerable goodwill towards veterans at all levels of government and on both sides of politics, but goodwill alone will not solve the challenges that Queensland veterans and their families face. The intent of my contribution today does not seek to lay the blame at the feet of the state government for not doing enough to support Queensland veterans. To be clear, it is my view that all levels of government and all political parties are not doing enough to meet their obligations to support those who have sacrificed and continue to sacrifice in the defence of Australia and its interests.

As a society, we acknowledge that the nature of military service is unique. In no other endeavour can a person be obligated to act in a way that is likely to result in their death or serious injury. It is because of this fact that the needs of veterans are different to that of the rest of Australian society. Similarities can be found when comparing the treatment of our police and emergency services personnel. However, I would contend that the demands of military service present different challenges to those faced by even our police and emergency services personnel.

Australian veterans are three times more likely to take their own life than their civilian counterparts. When any veteran dies by suicide it is a tragedy, but it is an all-too common tragedy that demonstrates that all levels of government are not doing enough to support veterans. Words without actions are meaningless and my concern is that the Queensland Veterans' Council in its proposed form will be nothing more than another bureaucracy that does nothing tangible to address the serious issues facing veterans and their families. Veterans need more from politicians than just laying wreaths on Anzac Day. They need more than words and gestures. It is not good enough for our society to ignore the challenges that veterans and their families must overcome long after the guns fall silent.

Anzac Square is a poignant reminder of the service of those who have sacrificed in the defence of Australia, but the true monument for the fallen should be ensuring that veterans and their families who are left behind are provided the support that they deserve to get on with their lives and to be a contributing member of society. The establishment of the Queensland Veterans' Council could be an

important step to focus the state government on this important task, but placing the focus of this bill predominantly on the maintenance of Anzac Square misses the mark. As the Defence Force Welfare Association observed in its contribution to the committee process—

The Act focusses the Veterans' Council on the management of, in order:

1. Anzac Square,
2. ANZAC Day Trust, and
3. 'Other Matters,' the latter as almost a throwaway line.

The order of importance seems to reflect a bureaucratic organisational imperative of sorting out the ANZAC Square management and maintenance organisational structure as the lead concern. Then to use the structure adopted to manage the ANZAC Day Trust and then throw in the management of other miscellaneous veteran stuff that is generally regarded as a federal, not state responsibility.

The Act's solution seems to assume that the experience and organisational structure needed to manage ANZAC Square is the same as that required to manage the ANZAC Day Trust and to advise government on veteran matters. It treats advice on veteran issues as a trivial matter.

Those are not my words; those are the words of John Lewis, the Queensland President of DFWA, although I agree with his sentiments completely.

The Queensland Veterans' Council needs to be the mechanism by which the state government better supports veterans and their families. The Veterans' Council should be the forum where important issues like veterans suicide and the welfare of defence families are discussed and, more importantly, where solutions are delivered. The Queensland Veterans' Council will only be meaningful if veterans have a genuine seat at the table and are listened to. The bill as proposed does not deliver that and instead ensures that veterans will be further disenfranchised. I note that the Attorney-General will move amendments to enshrine that 50 per cent of Queensland Veterans' Council members will be veterans, but given the chair can exercise a casting vote control of the Queensland Veterans' Council will still reside with individuals who are appointed by the state government. It is my view that the chair should be a veteran representative as well, and this view is supported by many of those who made submissions in relation to the bill.

The Anzac Day Trust has for many decades been managed by four veterans, and I should note it has been managed exceptionally well for the benefit of all Queensland veterans by those who understand the unique needs and circumstances facing veterans and their families—veterans like long-serving retired Army officers Greg Shannon and Colin Green, both of whom are men of capability and integrity who, along with many others, have volunteered countless hours supporting veterans. In his submission to the committee, former RSL Queensland state president Stewart Cameron contrasted the way that the Anzac Day Trust has been managed with the unnecessary bureaucracy that this bill creates and observed the considerable shortfall in funding available for measures to support veterans after \$2.4 million is spent on maintenance of Anzac Square. As Mr Cameron said—

There are very clearly better ways to spend \$2.4m a year supporting veterans. The money could be directly channelled into delivering services. The Council will in fact deliver no services at all, and at best be a talking shop.

There needs to be a shift away from bureaucracy and barriers to a system that enables and supports veterans to make the difficult transition to civilian life at the end of their military service. Veterans have skills and experiences that make them invaluable to potential employers because, due to the nature of military service, veterans are equipped with formal leadership skills, the ability to interpret complex information and to act decisively when presented with a problem. At their core, every veteran is a team player who can be relied upon to do whatever is required for their team to succeed.

Since being elected in 2017, I have had veterans working in my electorate office at times and, despite all of them being new to politics, they have performed exceptionally well. They perform exceptionally well because they are adaptable and they are focused on the mission, no matter what it is. All that said, some veterans and their families still need a little more support and it is support that the state government should be providing. I do not accept the contention made by the assistant minister for veterans that this is just a federal responsibility or that it is predominantly a federal responsibility; this is the responsibility of all levels of government and of every individual in society because the Australian Defence Force and veterans serve in their defence.

In conclusion, Queensland veterans and their families deserve better in my view than what is contained in this bill. They deserve real solutions rather than just another government bureaucracy focused more on the business of government than on supporting veterans. Supporting Queensland veterans is not just the responsibility of the federal government, as I said; supporting veterans and their families is the responsibility of all levels of government and the cursory and superficial level of support provided by the state government to date simply does not cut it. While the government's move to amend

veterans representation on the Queensland Veterans' Council is a good first step, it does not go far enough. There are still significant issues with this bill which the amendments to be moved by the shadow assistant minister for veterans, the member for Southern Downs, seek to remediate. Issues such as the welfare of veterans should be above political gamesmanship, and for that reason I ask the minister to support the opposition's amendments. Doing so will improve this bill and it will bring it more into line with the feedback received by veterans and ex-service organisations during the committee process.