




Speech By  
**James Lister**

**MEMBER FOR SOUTHERN DOWNS**

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

 **Mr LISTER** (Southern Downs—LNP) (5.18 pm): I rise in my capacity as shadow assistant minister for veterans in the LNP opposition to represent the LNP in the veterans bill 2021. I am proud to be a veteran myself and I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the opportunity to employ my 17 years experience as a veteran as part of the team.

From the outset, I would like to make it clear that when I refer to the veterans community, I am describing any person who has served in the Australian Defence Force or is serving in the Australian Defence Force and also includes their spouses and carers. A veteran, as I shall refer to them, should be taken to mean people who have served in or are serving in the Australian Defence Force now.

The implications of this bill are important to Queensland. Queensland is a defence state. We have always been a defence state. We have an illustrious military history spanning from colonial times through Federation to today with many warlike, humanitarian and peacekeeping commitments throughout. We have a large and growing veterans community in our state and their needs for state government provided services and considerations are growing.

Queensland is home to Australia's largest concentration of Australian Defence Force personnel, having as we do large military bases such as Lavarack Barracks in Townsville, Enoggera Barracks and RAAF Base Amberley.

**Mr McDonald:** Hear, hear!

**Mr LISTER:** I take that 'Hear, hear!' from my good friend the member for Lockyer. We have large bases in Townsville—Lavarack Barracks and RAAF Base Townsville.

**An honourable member** interjected.

**Mr LISTER:** I could mention Canungra as well. There are many other smaller locations within Queensland to which Australian Defence Force who are serving are posted. All up, there are 22,000 regular and full-time members of the Navy, Army and Air Force who are posted to Queensland defence locations. The veterans community is not comprised exclusively of serving personnel. Queensland is also home to 175,000 former serving members. There are 68,000 people who are either the spouse of a serving member or the spouse or carer of an ex-serving member. This does not even consider the children and dependants of our veterans community. All up, Queensland has 264,000 people who are members of the veterans community. This is seven per cent of the total Queensland adult population.

That is why this bill is important. We believe the bill is important but it has some flaws. In due course, on behalf of the LNP opposition, I will move amendments which seek to address the concerns we share with the veterans community in Queensland.

The bill was introduced by the Premier on 22 April 2021 and referred to the Community Support and Services Committee. The purpose of the bill as presented is to establish the Queensland Veterans' Council as a new statutory body. It would have three areas of responsibility previously held by other

bodies or levels of government. It would be the trustee of Anzac Square with responsibility for the ongoing management and operation of the square. It would take over the functions of the board of trustees under the Anzac Day Act 1995 and provide advice to the government on veterans issues.

As presented in the bill, the Queensland Veterans' Council would be made up of eight people: two members being dedicated veterans representatives nominated by veterans groups; four members to be nominated by the minister based on their experience relative to the Queensland Veterans' Council responsibilities; and two members being ex officio, one the CEO of the Brisbane City Council or their delegate and a departmental representative. Each appointed member would hold their position for four years. Members of the QVC would be paid in line with normal government remuneration procedures. I believe the amount would be set by the Governor in Council.

The bill provides that there will be a veterans reference group that sits under the QVC to assist the QVC consult with the broad range of veterans groups. It will have 12 members, including two members of the Queensland Veterans' Council. It would meet biannually. The reference group members, unlike the council members, would not be paid.

Anzac Square was dedicated as Queensland's state war memorial in 1930. It is a beautiful location. It sits on Crown land that was placed under the control of the Brisbane City Council as trustee. The Brisbane City Council currently meets the costs of maintaining Anzac Square and its parklands. This cost will be borne by the state with the formation of the Queensland Veterans' Council.

The Anzac Day Trust Fund provides annual payments to institutions, organisations or associations to help ex-service personnel and their dependants. The payments are funded predominantly by grants appropriated from the Queensland government. The Anzac Day Trust Fund was initially established in 1921. It is currently administered by the Anzac Day Trust, comprising a four-member board of trustees. In terms of funding, the government has proposed \$2.4 million per annum for Anzac Square and \$2.7 million over five years for the establishment of the Office for Veterans.

In our view, this bill is not without issues. The proposed Veterans' Council would see the voice of veterans watered down on decisions that impact them such as the operation and granting of funds from the Anzac Day Trust Fund. Under the bill, the chair does not have to be a veteran. I understand that on this and a number of other matters, the minister has foreshadowed amendments. That is good to see. The bill does not propose that the chair be a veteran.

As it stands, the Queensland Veterans' Council is more of an asset management body for Anzac Square and not a body to provide recommendations on veterans matters. The opposition fears that this is being set up so that the government can stack it out with their own appointments rather than members who are genuinely from the veterans community. The Community Support and Services Committee saw this glaring flaw and recommended that at least 50 per cent of the members should come from the veterans community.

With regard to the views of stakeholders, there were quite a few submissions from the veterans community and individuals. There were 12 in total. They included submissions from the Australian War Widows of Queensland, former executive members of the Queensland Veterans' Advisory Council and the Queensland Advisory Committee on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary, the RSL, Legacy, the Royal Australian Regiment Association, the Royal Australian Air Force Association of Queensland and the Defence Force Welfare Association. I would like to highlight two individuals who made submissions Air Commodore Stewart Cameron Rtd and Group Captain Rob Shortridge Rtd. I had the honour of serving beneath both those gentlemen as a young flying officer at RAAF Base Amberley many years ago. All of the submissions and all of the contributions by members from the veterans community and their representatives questioned the lack of veteran representation on the proposed QVC. Their concern was that nonveterans were going to be making decisions on issues that only veterans have an in-depth knowledge of.

As a veteran, I would like to say that there is a thing called unique nature of military service. Those who are members of the Australian Defence Force are either commissioned or enlisted to serve the country under any condition. They are not employed in the normal sense, but have to submit themselves to military discipline. They must accept orders and they must work continuously if necessary with no additional pay in dangerous and difficult conditions. Ultimately, they may be required to give their life in the service of their country or take the lives of others in the service of their country. Those are onerous obligations. For this reason, the specific nature of defence service can probably truly only be understood by veterans themselves. The LNP certainly believes that the Queensland Veterans' Council which is not dominated by the voices of veterans is not an appropriate source of advice for the government on veterans' matters.

I can give an example where the unique nature of service would require a knowledge of what serving life is like and how best to communicate in a constructive fashion what those matters are. For example, my wife and I are both veterans. My wife, Belinda, broke her leg badly at work whilst on the Air Force base at Amberley. She had to go to hospital, was ramped and spent several weeks in hospital as a result of developing fracture blisters. That is a matter where I would think the veterans groups through the Queensland Veterans' Council might communicate the needs of defence members and veterans who live in the area around Amberley.

Another concern we have—and our amendments will reflect this—is that two public servants are proposed to be on the Queensland Veterans' Council, making decisions and having voting rights on the council. Our amendments will propose that the Brisbane City Council representative be removed and that the functions relating to Anzac Square be devolved to a body to sit beneath the Queensland Veterans' Council. I think that would be a good thing and would provide more voices for veterans on that council.

The LNP wants to ensure that the majority of members on the Veterans' Council and the chair are veterans. We see the prime function of the council as dealing with veterans matters such as the disbursement of funds from the Anzac Day Trust Fund. Those council members with asset management experience who sat on the council under the government's bill will now sit on the Anzac Square reference committee, which we propose in our amendments. This will be chaired by the state government or Brisbane City Council representative and we believe is a more appropriate forum for considering matters to do the maintenance of Anzac Square. The committee will provide advice and recommendations to the council on the management of Anzac Square as an asset. The council will have final say on the management of the square though. Because the council will now be made up of a majority of veterans, the veterans reference group would no longer be required. The role it was to perform will be done by the Veterans' Council.

The committee recommended, as we have heard, that half of the members of the Queensland Veterans' Council should be veterans. We support that position. We would go further and say that, in order for the QVC to be genuinely representative of veterans, the chair of the council should be reserved for one of the veterans. We support the government's efforts to correct that mistake. I think it should be put on the record that the very fact that the government contemplated creating a Queensland Veterans' Council of eight members where only two were veterans themselves shows a lack of judgement and a tin ear for veterans matters. The criticism of that was universal from the veterans groups and individuals who submitted to the committee.

We also heard about the inadequate consultation during the development of the bill; the focus apparently being on Anzac Square more than on the welfare of veterans; and the membership of the Queensland Veterans' Council, including the underrepresentation of veterans and the appointment of public servants with voting rights.

We have serious concerns about the consultation that was undertaken on this bill. The inadequate consultation on the bill was raised by several submitters at the public hearing on 24 May 2021, including the Bundaberg District Women Veterans' Inc., the Defence Force Welfare Association—Queensland, RSL Queensland and the Legacy Club of Brisbane. The dissenting report says that the issue was raised with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The department was asked what had gone wrong with the consultation process and if stakeholders' views had been regarded. In response, the department advised, 'None of the people who participated in the consultation raised concerns about the potential structures and responsibilities of the Queensland Veterans' Council.' That statement seems to be entirely at odds—180 degrees out of sync—with the experience of the committee in dealing with the interest groups.

The issues facing veterans are not exclusively concerned with welfare, medical support and the things which people in the community might reasonably associate with veterans. To have a better understanding of the veterans community, the government does need advice. The Queensland Veterans' Council could be that vehicle. However, it is necessary that that body be equipped with the experience of the unique nature of military service to be able to provide cogent and correct advice to the government. As I said, the LNP will be supporting the bill but we will be moving amendments. I look forward to speaking on those at the time.