




Speech By
Laura Gerber

MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN

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QUEENSLAND VETERANS' COUNCIL BILL 2021

 **Mrs GERBER** (Currumbin—LNP) (2.29 pm): This bill affects real people—the people to whom we owe our freedoms—and I will take this opportunity to reiterate some of their messages in the words of these local veterans. One veteran recalled—

I was in hospital for three months suffering this awful depression and anxiety. They said it was PTSD. The first day I went out, I saw my first dead body. This dead body, who was a thriving human being 24 hours before, looked like one of the dead animals that had been hit by a car.

Another explained—

You can't blot out of your life man's inhumanity to man. It's there, it's always with you, it's vulgar, it's violent, it's frightening, and it's gut-wrenching. War is a bit like a motor vehicle, you have the violence of the crash of the vehicles, and then you have the violence and vulgarity of people being severely injured. The difference is that being in a war is a bit like being in a car crash everyday.

In my electorate of Currumbin we have a very large and proud veteran community. There are over 1,600 veterans registered with Veterans' Affairs on the southern Gold Coast, but we know there are many more veterans than that. There are many veterans, spouses and their families who are not represented in that data. All of these veterans and their families are supported in my community by our wonderful Tweed Heads-Coolangatta RSL Sub Branch and the Currumbin-Palm Beach RSL Sub Branch, including their young veteran support services and the Ron Workman OAM Veteran Support Centre.

The Young Veteran Support Services Centre is the first of its kind in South-East Queensland. It was established three years ago after identifying the need in our local community to better support and engage with our younger veterans. A key focus is support in social, health and wellbeing, and education and employment opportunities for both our young veterans and their families. Currumbin also has the Ron Workman OAM Veteran Support Centre, which was established in 1998 with the sole aim of supporting our veteran community. Initially run by hardworking volunteers, it now employs several qualified staff who specialise in offering veteran support services to our veteran community. This is our veteran community and these are the people this bill will affect.

It is because of this and the duty that I owe to our wonderful veteran community that I must put on the record the reservations I hold in relation to the bill and why the LNP will propose some amendments. I urge the government to consider the voices of our veteran community when they consider the LNP's amendments. As it stands, this bill will see the establishment of the Queensland Veterans' Council as a new statutory body. The bill proposes that the QVC will be made up of eight people who will hold their positions for up to four years. The bill initially proposed that only two of those positions would be dedicated to veteran representatives while the rest were government appointments.

There were 12 submissions made to the committee during the consideration of this bill, and all of these submissions raised concerns with the lack of actual veteran representation on the council. Veterans are the only people with in-depth, first-hand knowledge of the unique needs and circumstances facing veterans and their families. The committee acknowledged this in their report, and

I understand the Attorney-General has foreshadowed amendments to ensure that four of the eight positions will now be occupied by veterans. We support the government's efforts to correct this mistake. For the council to be genuinely representative of veterans the government should ensure that the chair is also a veteran. The chair will have the casting vote so the chair needs to be a veteran. This is not proposed by the government. This is just one aspect of the bill that, in my view, lets the veteran community down. The council should be headed up by a veteran.

Another missed opportunity in this bill relates to the responsibilities and priorities of the QVC. It is proposed that council have three core areas of responsibility: firstly, to be a trustee of Anzac Square with the responsibility for the ongoing management and operation of the square. Anzac Square is currently under the control of the Brisbane City Council, which meets the costs of preserving, maintaining and enhancing the amazing legacy that is Anzac Square. Secondly, the council will manage the Anzac Day Trust Fund, which provides annual payments to organisations to help veterans and their families. For many decades the Anzac Day Trust Fund has been very well managed by four veterans, but this will change under the QVC structure. The third core area of responsibility is to provide advice to government on veterans issues.

The veterans community has raised legitimate concerns about the combining of these three functions within the remit of the QVC and also the prioritisation of these functions by the state government. The Queensland president of the Defence Force Welfare Association submitted—

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 Square Trust and to advise government on veteran matters. It treats advice on veteran issues as a trivial matter.

The former chair of the Queensland Veterans' Advisory Council stated that the bill—

... removes a 100-year-old faith in the veterans' community to manage the funds of the Anzac Day Trust ... It mixes bricks and mortar with the welfare of people.

He further stated—

The biggest problem with what this bill calls a veteran's council is that it is trying to run together two Acts—about Anzac Square, to look after a static thing which has different requirements, and looking after people's welfare.

Mr Andrew Craig, a Royal Australian Navy veteran who served as vice chair and subsequently chair of the Queensland Advisory Committee, made a similar point, stating—

... the bill attempts to conflate three elements, all of which require different skills and methods of operation.

To resolve this issue Mr Stewart Cameron, former president of RSL Queensland, suggested—

... that the management and conservation and significant aspects of Anzac Square need to be treated as a separate entity ... The veterans community should be treated as a separate issue.

I agree with all these submitters; furthermore, I would like to see the priorities of the Queensland Veterans' Council squarely on veteran welfare. I believe that placing the focus of this bill predominantly on the maintenance of Anzac Square is a missed opportunity for the state government to better support veterans and their families.

Concerns were also raised around the shortfall in funding for veteran support. Given the amount of funding allocated to the maintenance of Anzac Square—\$2.4 million—submitters to the bill held concerns that not enough money is being allocated to deliver services to support veterans. In fact, the Queensland Veterans' Council will not deliver any services at all.

In my view, this bill is a missed opportunity for the state government to tackle some of the critical concerns of veterans such as homelessness, mental health and the challenges that many veterans face when transitioning from military service. We need to do better for the spouses and children of Queensland's veterans. We need to do more than just lay wreaths on Anzac Day. We need to provide more than just words and gestures.

The amendments put forward by the LNP will take into account the concerns raised by stakeholders and ensure this bill better represents our veteran community. The LNP's amendments will improve the bill, so I urge the government to put politics aside and consider improving the bill.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge and thank all of the people in the Currumbin electorate who support our veteran community. Thank you to veteran David Freeman AM, who operates a veterans support program from his farm in Currumbin Valley. Thank you to the Currumbin RSL's Veteran Support Centre and Young Veterans Support Services for their incredible work in initiating an ex-service organisations collaboration forum. This forum brings together ex-service organisations to collaborate on how they can best service the veteran community in an holistic manner.

My community has identified that one of the biggest barriers veterans face when getting support and assistance is navigating the services on offer. This forum helps our veteran community to navigate the challenges they face by mapping services, creating a directory and recommending specific services that support them in transitioning from service. Just last weekend the ESO came together to participate in an expo at the Currumbin RSL in support of Veterans' Health Week.

There are so many wonderful people in the Currumbin electorate who provide vital services to our local veteran community, and I wish to put on the record my sincere thanks to every single one of them for everything they do to support not only veterans but their families, their spouses and their children. It is vital work. In my view, this bill is a missed opportunity to further support veterans not just in relation to the Anzac Day Trust but also in the welfare and services they need to be provided with in order to transition from military service and also veterans who are currently serving.