




Speech By
Michael Berkman

MEMBER FOR MAIWAR

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QUEENSLAND VETERANS' COUNCIL BILL

 **Mr BERKMAN** (Maiwar—Grn) (5.04 pm): I rise to give a contribution on the Queensland Veterans' Council Bill 2021. As we have heard from others, this bill would establish the Queensland Veterans' Council. This new council, the QVC, would play two quite distinct roles. The first is to take on administrative responsibilities as the trustee of Anzac Square and also in administering the Anzac Day Trust Fund. The second would be to replace the existing Queensland Veterans' Advisory Council, or QVAC, as the body responsible for advising government on matters relating to veterans, and they would take on that role with the support of a veterans reference group that is also proposed to be established under the bill.

Our experience on the committee was that the administrative functions proposed to be undertaken by QVC were relatively uncontentious. Submitters did express some concerns about the extent of consultation and the split function of QVC and the perception that veterans welfare concerns were subordinate to the administration of the trust fund and their role as the trustee of Anzac Square. There were some concerns about the potential for loss of funding and taking away from the veterans community discretion about how the trust fund was administered. The department has responded, as I understand it, to all of those concerns with more or less specificity, but the main issues raised in the hearings and that I will focus my comments on today are to do with the proposed composition of the QVC and the discretion around the establishment of the veterans advisory group—both issues which are proposed to be dealt with by amendments from the government.

Turning first to the composition of QVC, a sensible starting point in considering that issue is the membership of QVAC, the existing body that QVC will be replacing in performing those advisory functions. QVAC comprises a chairman and up to 11 other members from the Queensland veterans community. That includes veterans associations, associated ex-service organisations and people with a direct link to interest in veterans issues. Importantly, members of QVAC are nominated or identified by the Queensland veterans community.

The pervasive concern we heard was that the veterans community could be effectively underrepresented on the QVC since the bill, in its initial form, only provides for veterans organisations to nominate two of the eight members of the council. That struck me as an entirely reasonable concern given the significance of the advisory role that QVC is proposed to perform and the importance of having direct experience of veterans feed into that important role.

The department's response initially to these concerns was that, while there is no strict requirement around the number of veterans or representatives of veterans organisations on QVC, there is also no upper limit on the numbers in this respect. Ultimately, there is nothing stopping the nomination of more veterans groups representatives on QVC. They also put to us that the veterans reference group was comprised of members who necessarily had closer ties to the veterans community.

Having heard and considered the department's response, I was very pleased that the committee adopted recommendation 2, which suggests an amendment to mandate that at least 50 per cent of the members of the QVC must be veterans or representatives of the veterans community. I commend the government for picking up on that recommendation and proposing the amendments they have.

The other key concern was around the establishment of the veterans reference group. As I mentioned a moment ago, the department relied on the establishment of this group, and its membership composed of members of the veterans community, in response to concerns about underrepresentation on the QVC. The sticking point was that there is no requirement in the bill as originally drafted for the minister to establish the reference group. Clause 34 of the bill provides that this is a matter for the minister's discretion.

During the hearings I asked members of DPC whether there were any practical or implementation barriers to making the establishment of the reference group a requirement under the act. They confirmed there was no real impediment to that. I think that recommendation 3 is pretty simple, straightforward and commendable; namely, that clause 34 be amended to mandate the establishment of the reference group. It is a very straightforward amendment with the proposed substitution of 'may' for 'must'. I think those concerns have been very simply dealt with by the government with the amendments proposed. In summary, I do commend the government for having picked up on the recommendations made by the committee. They are simple and sensible recommendations that, in my view, address the key concerns that were raised throughout the committee process.

Before I take my seat I want to thank, as always, the committee secretariat for all their hard work. We have had a few changes in our secretariat this year, but we have always been wonderfully supported in the work we have done on the Community Support and Services Committee and I thank my fellow committee members. I support this bill.