




Speech By  
**Stephen Bennett**

**MEMBER FOR BURNETT**

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Record of Proceedings, 14 October 2021

**QUEENSLAND VETERANS' COUNCIL BILL**

 **Mr BENNETT** (Burnett—LNP) (5.38 pm): Following on from the chair, I acknowledge the work of my committee members and the secretariat in drafting this report. It is amazing some of the issues we deal with when doing committee work, particularly in interesting areas of legislative reform. For those who have not visited the Anzac Square memorial here in Brisbane, I suggest you make it a priority.

Our committee's visit was fantastic and informative. I must admit that I walk around Brisbane a fair bit, but I have never really taken the time to absorb that amazing opportunity. I do not need to repeat what has been said about why the memorial exists. On 5 December 1974, by order in council the land was placed under the control of the Brisbane City Council as trustee, and I guess we are moving forward into another management structure. Between 2014 and 2019 significant restoration work was undertaken on Anzac Square. As I said, do yourself a favour: go and see it.

I pass on my thanks for all of their work and passion to the staff of the State Library of Queensland, including Linda Barron, director, and Alice Rawkins, team leader. We met the amazing Wade Fitzgerald, project manager, from the Brisbane City Council and Aashish, senior project manager. I want to put on record my acknowledgment and thanks for the work they have done in transforming what we have before us today. I want to acknowledge the minister and the work the chair has done.

It is important to acknowledge the amendments to be moved during consideration in detail. That is an important step, and I think the bill will be stronger for those amendments. It is important that we acknowledge the submitters to the committee, and I want to talk about a few of them as we move forward. That said, I do hope that serious consideration can be given to some, if not all, of the member for Southern Downs's proposed amendments. I will explain in more detail my thoughts about the remuneration issue raised by the chair, but that is the government's choice and I can always live with that.

There were concerns about the bill which we spoke about during the committee process. I do believe there were serious issues with the consultation on this bill. The issue of inadequate consultation was raised by many submitters in the public hearings in May. The Bundaberg District Women Veterans, the Defence Force Welfare Association, RSL Queensland and Legacy Brisbane all talked about the lack of consultation. I raised that with the Department of the Premier and Cabinet officials at the public hearing on 24 May and asked what had gone wrong with the process. The department advised that—

None of the people who participated in the consultation raised concerns about the potential structures and responsibilities and functions of the QVC.

This statement is inconsistent with the views of those submitters, and that is why I put on record that there were serious flaws in the consultation process. Many felt quite aggrieved about that, and I put that on the record. I guess that will be for others to determine.

Daniel O'Kearney, the former chair of the Queensland Veterans' Advisory Council, stated at the public hearing—

... 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 really is trying to run together two Acts—about Anzac Square, to look after a static thing which has different requirements, and about looking after people's welfare.

I thank Mr O'Kearney for that because it was very important and relevant. Mr Andrew Craig 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, who most of us know, 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. Defence Force Welfare Association Queensland echoed this view, saying—

Anzac Square deserves focus by itself. It has clear boundaries and clear bricks and mortar responsibilities ...

I want to share the legitimate concerns of those submitters about the focus of the Veterans' Council. We note that the report suggests that the Veterans' Council, if established, should consider setting up advisory committees, and they are being discussed this evening. As has been alluded to, the bill should go further to require that separate entities be created to perform these very different functions.

I note the changes to clause 13 about membership; they are truly welcomed. I hope that a veteran can be made the chair of that organisation as a result of amendments moved during consideration in detail. I support recommendation 2 of the committee report, which has been addressed, that representation must be 50 per cent veterans. We really have to make sure we do not ever erode the strong voice of the veterans community in all that we do in this state on a lot more issues than this bill. I have mentioned the chair, and I hope we can do that.

Clause 17 of the bill provides for the appointment of members. This relates to remuneration allowances. I have raised the issue of the appropriateness of paying remuneration to members as it may impact their ability to provide unbiased advice and compromise their ability to do that. We note the department's inability to provide any information about the level of remuneration they would receive. When questioned about this, the department came back to me and said—

To be honest, we have not got to that point yet. We have not considered what band they would fit in under the remuneration procedures.

It was concerning that we have not even put thought into what we are going to pay these people. I hope it is not just remuneration to fit a person et cetera. How can we have unbiased, fair and frank advice given to a council when we are paying these people remuneration to keep them in a job? I still do not believe it is fair. The chief executives or employees of the department and Brisbane City Council are to be members of the QVC—

**A government member** interjected.

**Mr BENNETT:** I will take those interjections from whoever wants to talk about it. Why don't we just give the veterans community some respect and allow them to run this as they have in the past? Why do we have to pay people?

**A government member** interjected.

**Mr BENNETT:** Well, there you go. So take that; that is my point.

**A government member** interjected.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Kelly): Order, members! There is only one speaker on their feet.

**Mr BENNETT:** All that said, my contribution is that I thought fair remuneration was about travel expenses so we did not have people out of pocket. My point is that I am talking about remuneration. It is my contribution, so it is my speech. I put on record that I do not think we should be paying these people for a very good reason. I do not think we will get fair and unbiased advice given once we have these people in our back pockets.

The trust fund is currently administered by four people, at least three of whom must come from the veterans community. In the words of Mr O'Kearney, the bill rips up history and tradition and provides that nonveterans will oversee the trust fund. I want to put that on the record. I share the submitters' concerns.

I do have concerns about the lack of detail about the funding of the Veterans' Council in order to perform its function of managing Anzac Square. The department advised that the \$2.4 million per annum budget allocation, referenced in the explanatory notes, includes the cost of the Office for Veterans, the Veterans' Council, the maintenance and operation of Anzac Square Parklands and the operation, including the curation, of the memorial galleries. There is little to no detail about depreciation, future capital costs, ongoing asset maintenance of the heritage structures at Anzac Square, and without

these details it is difficult to judge the real ongoing costs in the proposal for the bill. With that, I hope we can have a mature debate about the amendments. Remember the veterans in our community. Let's give them the respect they deserve as we finally debate this piece of legislation.