

# VERIFIED VERSION

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2016–17

Melbourne — 19 May 2016

#### Members

Mr Danny Pearson — Chair

Ms Sue Pennicuik

Mr David Morris — Deputy Chair

Ms Harriet Shing

Dr Rachel Carling-Jenkins

Mr Tim Smith

Mr Steve Dimopoulos

Ms Vicki Ward

Mr Danny O'Brien

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#### Witnesses

Mr John Eren, Minister for Veterans, and

Ms Angela Bourke, Acting Director, Veterans, Department of Premier and Cabinet

**The CHAIR** — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2016–17 budget estimates. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP, and Ms Angela Bourke, Acting Director, Veterans, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

All evidence is taken by this committee under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act, attracts parliamentary privilege and is protected from judicial review. Comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege. Witnesses will not be sworn but are requested to answer all questions succinctly, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

Questions from the committee will be asked on a group basis, meaning that specific time has been allocated to members of the government, opposition and crossbench to ask a series of questions in a set amount of time before moving on to the next group. I will advise witnesses who will be asking questions at each segment.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will be provided with proof versions of the transcript for verification as soon as available. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

All written communication to witnesses must be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the public gallery cannot participate in the committee's proceedings in any way and cannot photograph, audio record or videorecord any part of these proceedings. Members of the media must remain focused only on the persons speaking. Any filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I invite the witness to make a very brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from the committee.

### **Visual presentation.**

**Mr EREN** — Thank you, Chair. I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to present you with an update in relation to the work we have undertaken for our veterans community. Earlier today I presented to you updates in relation to my sport and tourism and major events portfolios. Melbourne and Victoria are well regarded as the sporting and major events capital of the world, and they form critical parts of the social fabric of our society and economic wellbeing of course. However, none of this would be possible without the service and sacrifice of our veterans who have helped Victoria become a prosperous, modern and multicultural state. I would also like to acknowledge all members of Parliament for their support of the veterans portfolio in a bipartisan way.

I am proud of what we have achieved on behalf of veterans in 2015–16. In September 2015 I opened the \$1.3 million veterans accommodation project in Richmond, which provides five units for short to medium-term accommodation to veterans in crisis. The shrine's Galleries of Remembrance have now been open for over a year and are proving extremely popular. The shrine engaged a record 1 million people in the 2015 calendar year. The shrine is also on track to meet its target of engaging with 65 000 students. I am delighted to report that yesterday, as voted by visitors on TripAdvisor, the Shrine of Remembrance was voted as Australia's fourth most beloved landmark — —

**Ms WARD** — Australia's?

**Mr EREN** — In Australia. We have delivered our \$1.2 million commitment over four years to extend free public transport concessions to all EDA/TPI ex-service personnel, and to date 97 veterans have benefited from the free travel pass. The Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize was increased in 2016 from 28 to 42 students, allowing 22 students to participate in the overseas study tour and 20 students to travel to Canberra. Working closely with the Victorian Veterans Council and the Victorian Anzac Centenary Committee, we have approved to date 84 grants to the value of over \$900 000 across the veterans portfolio in 2015–16, with an additional \$500 000 worth of grants to be announced before the end of this financial year.

We have continued working to commemorate the centenary of Anzac. The Anzac centenary roadshow, *Victoria's Journey of Remembrance*, has engaged with nearly 10 000 students and over 2700 community members. We have provided \$200 000 to the 5000 Poppies project — by the way, 5000 Poppies is now over

300 000 poppies, which is fantastic to see — to participate in the 2016 Chelsea Flower Show in London. Three hundred thousand handcrafted poppies will take a prominent role in one of the most prestigious flower and garden events from next week. The Anzac centenary house plaque trial commenced in March in Ballarat, Hawthorn, Williamstown and Geelong to mark homes from where participants in World War I enlisted.

Anzac Day 2016 marked the 100th anniversary of this national day of commemoration, first held in 1916, to mark the landing. Forty-five thousand people attended the Anzac Day dawn service at the shrine, and we saw increased attendance at local services across the state. The Victorian government's Anzac centenary website listed over 300 Anzac Day services and proved again to be popular, recording approximately 96 000 page views in April, 36 200 page views on Anzac Day eve and nearly 15 000 on Anzac Day itself.

The 50th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan and the Vietnam war commemorations are progressing well. The Victorian government contributed \$1 million towards a number of initiatives that includes the gravesite commemorations held on 21 February 2016; VetRide, a commemorative cycle event held in March; a Vietnam war history competition; and \$250 000 for upgrades to the National Vietnam Veterans Museum at Phillip Island. Vietnam Veterans Day 2016, on 18 August, will be an important part of the commemorations which all Victorians are encouraged to participate in.

Looking forward, we will continue working to assist our veterans. We have committed \$1 million to a Veterans Heritage and History strategy to safeguard our wartime legacy for the future. The Victorian veterans sector study was also undertaken by the Victorian Veterans Council and contains 14 recommendations for Victoria's veteran community. Issues and opportunities raised in the report include the veterans council's role and profile, improving access to services for individuals for training, employment, mental health and family violence, and the need for better collection of and access to data and information. The government will respond to the findings and recommendations of the report in due course.

I thank the committee again for the opportunity to present you with an update of the veteran's portfolio, and I am happy to take any questions on these matters.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister, and at the outset I do want to congratulate you for the leadership you showed recently in state Parliament, when we recognised the contribution made by both Anglo Australian Vietnam veterans but also Vietnamese Australian Vietnam veterans. It was very touching, in the Assembly, and it was a really great time to be a member of the Parliament. We have got government questions now until 4.31 p.m.

**Ms WARD** — Thank you, Minister. I agree with the Chair and his congratulations, but I also want to congratulate you, Minister, and your department on the work that has been going on around the Anzac centenary. You have referred to it in your presentation today, and I have to say, Minister, you might think the shrine is pretty good, but you need to come out to our dawn service at Eltham because it is pretty spectacular.

**Mr Dimopoulos interjected.**

**Ms WARD** — Eltham Rotary does a wonderful job. Yes, I am parochial, Mr Dimopoulos, and I am not ashamed of it at all.

Could you please give us an update as to how this is going? I know that my own Montmorency-Eltham RSL has put in a considerable amount of work, and I do want to give a vote of recognition to Terry Phillips, one of our local historians, who has done a tremendous amount of work, not just for my seat but across the north-east of Melbourne and even further. He is quite an amazing man. Could you please give us an idea of what is happening more broadly, beyond my parochial borders of the north-east of Melbourne, and tell us what is happening to commemorate the service and sacrifice of World War I servicemen and women?

**Mr EREN** — Sure. Thank you very much for your question. Out of all of my portfolios, I would have to say that the veterans one is the one that I actually enjoy the most in relation to how significant it is for, collectively, all of us. Many of you would know my history and background and of course the Anzac campaign and the Gallipoli service last year that I attended. It was such an honour and a privilege to be an Australian of Turkish background, if I can call it that. So clearly this part of my portfolios sees me travel a fair bit. The veterans community are salt of the earth people. They do not want much; they do not want, really, the recognition. All they want is a bit of acknowledgement that they want to do certain projects in their own areas.

**Ms WARD** — That is right.

**Mr EREN** — That is why it is important, and I have said this before — the veterans portfolio is predominantly a federal issue. Thanks to Steve Bracks, of course, we were the first state to acknowledge the veterans, and we created a portfolio in relation to veterans. Of course now, in leading that way, other states and territories have followed suit. So the moneys that we are investing and the \$5 million that we have allocated will go a long way towards making sure that the RSLs and other service organisations can apply for funding and there are lots of opportunities to expend that money.

Of course we are always looking for new ways of spending that money, and I have got to say that the little projects are the ones that are the most significant sometimes. Even on the VetRide, when we recently did that ride — all the way from Seymour to Canberra. I did the first leg, and we obviously helped with funding some of that, because that was jeopardised. That ride was actually jeopardised, and it was potentially not going to go ahead. So we rescued it. That ride was so significant, and what happened through that ride is, of course, all of those relevant people got together and showed camaraderie amongst each other and went all the way to Canberra. I do not know how they did it. I did the first leg, which was about 70 kilometres, and I was really tired, but they went all the way to Canberra, which was amazing to see.

**Ms SHING** — It is amazing to see how people can be inspired to do extraordinary things in commemoration of significant events, Minister. Thank you for your presentation, and the work of the department and of agencies and of community groups — RSLs, auxiliaries, historical societies throughout Victoria. Their work is done without any expectation of recognition or reward. It is done to preserve and to conserve memories and to provide dignity and closure in many instances to people who have gone to war, those who have not returned and their families and those who come back and often are changed forever as a consequence.

Minister, on that point, I take you to budget paper 3, pages 288 and 297, and to the part of your presentation that relates to veterans welfare projects. This is a really significant part of the work in veterans affairs that goes beyond the commemorative days, that goes beyond the ceremonies and the way in which people come together to celebrate and to memorialise, but it goes also to how we invest in welfare around the issues confronting older veterans, younger veterans, female veterans and changes to the circumstances of ex-service personnel. Can you talk to us about how the government's \$1 million investment in the Vietnam veterans commemoration is going as well as the way in which veterans welfare projects more generally are designed to assist people in their ongoing journey once they return from conflict?

**Mr EREN** — Absolutely. One thing I have found in the time that I have been the Minister for Veterans is respecting, acknowledging and never forgetting the services of the past but also the current services that are being conducted — so contemporary veterans who go on peacekeeping missions or go on tours of duty in other parts of the world, which are extremely dangerous. Some of them come back injured, of course physically, but all of them almost come back mentally injured, and so they find it really hard to come back and fit into normal society. That is why in relation to some of the experiences that they have had, one of them is being homeless. And, you know, I do not see these as handouts; I see these as hand ups. From time to time every individual has a bad time in their life, and it is incumbent upon us, after what they have done — they have risked their life and limb basically for us as a nation, as a state — and the least that we can do as a state and as a nation is to look after these people that ultimately knew exactly what they were risking. I am not sure how many people in this room would just get up and go to a nation knowing that potentially they could be killed, and so when they come back they deserve the respect, they deserve the accolade. They deserve some assistance from the government.

**Ms SHING** — So in terms of assistance and what that actually translates as, how do we counter and challenge the homelessness issues, mental health and wellbeing issues, post-traumatic stress disorder, access to services and provide those sorts of programs that can help veterans and returned services personnel to actually continue with life after that journey?

**Mr EREN** — Correct. And that is why it was such a great moment when I actually opened those five units for returned servicemen and women. It is \$1.35 million. When you think about it, it is not a large amount of money, and when you think about the good that it does for the veterans community, it is unbelievable. It is now fully occupied.

**Ms SHING** — It is about dignity, is it not?

**Mr EREN** — It is about dignity. It is about, acknowledging what they have gone through and acknowledging that they are having a tough time at the moment. So at 1.35 million, it is not a lot of money. It is five units — five ex-service personnel now occupying that space. So when you consider the \$400 000 on welfare and of course the RSL and the other ESOs that will look at how to best expend that money with their community, I just think of the federal government, because the veterans portfolio is largely part of their realm politically. Of course as I have indicated, we were the first state to actually have a veterans portfolio, thanks to Steve Bracks, and we will do what we can as a state to help our veterans.

**Ms WARD** — The Vietnam veterans arrangements that have been made this year are also very good.

**The CHAIR** — Order! Mr Smith, until 4.40 p.m.

**Mr T. SMITH** — If I could follow on from comments from Labor members with regard to the importance of this portfolio and the significance of last year, our country has been a force for good in the world for now over 100 years. I think we have remembered that poignantly here in Victoria and nationally across the country. Hopefully that continues forevermore. Minister, I want to preface this by the fact that these questions are genuinely designed to gain information. We are not trying to make a political point here.

**Mr EREN** — No, I appreciate that.

**Mr T. SMITH** — The output in 14–15 was 8.4 million, and in this budget it is 6.9 million. So that is a decrease — a substantial decrease. Were there any new output or asset initiatives in this budget, any new programs?

**Mr EREN** — Look, can I just say in relation to this, we have allocated \$5 million obviously. So leading up to the centenary — the hundredth anniversary of that very significant war — there was a whole lot of work and dedication and moneys allocated to the hundredth anniversary. So when you think about the total outputs, which are expected to be 7.2 million — in budget paper 3, 297 — 2015–16 expected outcome is lower than 15–16 due to the deferral of some activities from 15–16 to 16–17. This is a phasing issue, and as I have indicated before, only on the delivery of these Anzac centenary projects. One on the Western front and the other on conscription will not be affected. Due to circumstances where we have moved our budget because of the federal manoeuvring that went on, the outputs will be significantly different in a few weeks time. There will be certain moneys allocated and announced over the coming weeks, and so it was just the timing of, for example, our process at the moment, which sees an output which is a bit less.

But having said that, I can certainly say, hand on heart, the activity that led up to the hundredth in 2015 was a lot more. Just as, for example, we saw last year the very significant hundredth anniversary, 80 000 people attended the shrine service; this year it was 45 000. So there will be a tapering off of not only applications, there will be a tapering off in terms of the activities that go on, which go back to normal levels, because at the hundredth anniversary there was so much activity going on. That is why you will see a peak in the activity or outputs, and then it will taper down because it is not the hundredth anniversary anymore.

**Mr T. SMITH** — This is an observation across the country, not a party-political observation with regard to Victoria, but 46 000 Australians died in France in World War I, and 1916 commemorates the battles of Fromelles, Pozières, our contribution to the Somme; and 2017 will commemorate Passchendaele, Ypres, the charge at Beersheba, our contribution to the commitment in the Middle East in World War I.

I personally do not want to see those contributions — obviously Gallipoli was highly symbolic in terms of the nation, but in terms of the overall sacrifice, Charles Bean said there is no field in the world that is littered with more Australian dead than Fromelles in particular. And these battles need to be, I think, absolutely remembered and mourned in the same way that I think we did as a country so magnificently for the centenary of Gallipoli.

**Mr EREN** — Look, I totally agree with you, Tim. There are so many significant events that occurred; it is not just that. But because that was seen to have the most casualties, the biggest war in our history certainly, there is so much concentration on it. I mean, for example, 4 August is the start of World War I in Britain; 15 August is Victory in the Pacific Day; 18 August is Vietnam Veterans Day, which is the significant 50th anniversary of Long Tan; 1 September is the start of World War II; 2 September is the end of World War II in 1945; 24 October is the Korean War commemoration; and 11 November is Remembrance Day.

So there are a number of significant events that happened throughout the year, and all of them are even par in terms of how significant they are, obviously, for those families and people involved in those various wars. There is no questioning that. So we as a government are obviously seeking through the veterans council, the commemoration committee, on which, by the way, Ted is doing a great job — —

**Mr T. SMITH** — Minister, I think it is just important to note — and I am not trying to diminish the significance of Gallipoli — we lost, combined, in Pozières and Fromelles more than we lost on the Gallipoli peninsula. I just think particularly from an educational perspective, and I suppose indeed from a moral perspective, we were there defending France's liberty, and we lost more people in July 1916 than we lost in nine months on Gallipoli. So I just think that needs to be, frankly, taught far more vociferously and indeed more broadly to schoolchildren and indeed to the broader populace.

**Mr EREN** — Look, I agree. I think the more educational programs that we have to highlight the importance of what happened in our past — it is important, you know. Lest we forget: we say it at services, and we do not want this to be forgotten. And we want our history to be looked at in a way where, for example with the Vietnam veterans, for the first time ever some of the events that I go to — it is heartbreaking, you know — they are being acknowledged at the moment. They have never been acknowledged before, and so all of those programs that we have this year — —

**Mr T. SMITH** — Which is to our country's shame, I agree with you.

**Mr EREN** — And to a certain extent we do. We have got new activities on the Western Front this year across the state. We have a new primary school roadshow on World War I, and we have got \$5 million for which we are open to advice from the ESOs and of course all of those veterans organisations — the RSL and the peak bodies — to actually make applications. That is why we are proud of the moneys that we have got available for organisations to actually give us ideas and suggestions on how we can expend that money, and that is what we are listening to — the veterans council and other peak bodies like the RSL — to actually inform us on how they would like it spent. So there is \$500 000 in new grants, for example, that will be announced.

There are a number of different organisations that are trying to actually come to us as a government and say, 'This is our priority and this is what we would like to see — a program for the government to fund'. And we are listening to those stakeholders in relation to that.

**Mr T. SMITH** — So in terms of the commemoration of Long Tan, you have talked about the million dollars. Now, is that in this year's budget or was that money from last year?

**Mr EREN** — It is over two financial years. So we announced that obviously, and it will be over two financial years.

**Mr T. SMITH** — And in terms of 23 July, which is the anniversary of Fromelles, what is the state government doing?

**Mr EREN** — We have got the new activity, which is on the Western Front and this year will be across the state, and we would like the local governments to obviously — —

**Mr T. SMITH** — Sorry, correction: Pozières is 23 July. My mistake: it was Pozières; I said Fromelles.

**The CHAIR** — Maybe take it on notice for Mr Smith.

**Mr EREN** — Sure. Look, as I indicated to you earlier, the peak organisations actually come to us as a government and say — —

**The CHAIR** — Order! Dr Carling-Jenkins, until 4.45 p.m.

**Dr CARLING-JENKINS** — Thank you, Minister. This is a sobering note to finish the day on but a very important one. I would also like to thank you for your advocacy in the recent Anzac commemorations for Vietnam veterans in particular. Your efforts in raising recognition for Vietnam vets was appreciated by many in the Parliament but also, significantly, throughout the community. Thank you.

I just want to pick up on a couple of points that have already been covered, partly in Mr Smith's questions, for example. I know that you have acknowledged as well that just as we once ignored the Vietnam vets, with serious consequences, there are times when our vets from duties fighting the ill-defined war on terror seem to be forgotten as well, and I note that you have already stated in this hearing your respect for the contemporary veterans here today. I also just want to tie that in to the million-dollar announcement of the heritage and history strategy that is designed, as in the presentation here, 'to safeguard our wartime legacy for future generations'. I just wonder if you could describe for the committee how this strategy will involve our relatively young veterans who have a really strong story to tell and contribute as well.

**Mr EREN** — Look, this is a real passion of mine. I know a number of contemporary veterans that I consider friends, and they come to me with various ideas on how we as a government can best help our contemporary veterans. One of them is clearly about fitting back into society and how they can have meaningful jobs going forward and be part of a productive society themselves, and sometimes it is really hard. It is hard to come back from an environment like that and fit into society in a normal way. You would need to be a robot. Any human being is affected in a way when they see horrific stuff like they do overseas. So for us it is very much about listening and making sure that we accommodate them in a number of different ways. Accommodation is one of them. The other one is obviously some mental health assistance in relation to accessing mental health — —

**Dr CARLING-JENKINS** — Sure. There is quite a high incidence of PTSD, is there not, amongst — —

**Mr EREN** — Absolutely, and I am working very closely obviously with Martin Foley in relation to some of those works that he is doing, and we are investing massive amounts of money into mental health. There was a veterans sector study that was recently commissioned by the Victorian Veterans Council, and of course the report was published online on 13 February. It made some very poignant recommendations — 14 recommendations — for the Victorian veterans community ranging from further developing the council's role and profile and of course looking at how we can help.

For example, there are some contemporary veterans or veterans that do not want to be accommodated. They actually just head bush and live in a tent. And there is not much that you can do there, because that is how they feel at ease with some of the pain that they hold within. And as much as you like to reach out and try to help, they are not ready for that help, and so we need to be cognisant of that fact as well.

So whether it is the \$400 000 allocated to welfare of veterans, whether it is the \$1.3 million we have allocated to the five units to accommodate veterans, whether it is coming up with new ways of how we can find meaningful employment for contemporary veterans, that is what I will be concentrating on, knowing that it is not going to go away. We are always having peacekeeping missions abroad, and it is only going to grow.

**Dr CARLING-JENKINS** — Absolutely, Minister. So what I was getting at too was preserving that history, so making sure that we do not lose the stories of our contemporary veterans. I just wonder what work is being done in that space as well.

**Mr EREN** — So again we are in the hands of the RSLs and the service providers, the organisations themselves, in best how to tackle this. Am I an expert in this? Nowhere near it, and so what I want to do is make sure that I listen to the people that know what they are talking about. So that is why I work so closely with those peak organisations and work through the ESOs and talk to young veterans through the VVC, and of course all of those conversations that either I have or the department has will go a long way to finding out how we can find a solution to some of the problems that exist.

**Dr CARLING-JENKINS** — Thank you, Minister.

**The CHAIR** — Order! I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance: the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP, and Ms Bourke. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing. A written response should be provided within 14 calendar days of that request.

**Committee adjourned.**