

# VERIFIED VERSION

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2015–16

Melbourne — 19 May 2015

#### Members

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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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Executive officer: Ms Valerie Cheong

#### Witnesses

Mr John Eren, Minister for Veterans,

Mr Joshua Puls, Director, and

Ms Angela Bourke, Manager, Veterans Branch, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**The CHAIR** — I declare open the public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the 2015–16 budget estimates. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

I would like to welcome to the hearing today the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP; Mr Joshua Puls, Director, Veterans Branch, Department of Premier and Cabinet; and Ms Angela Bourke, Manager, Veterans Branch, 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. Any comments made outside the hearing, including on social media, are not afforded such privilege. The committee does not require witnesses to be sworn, but questions must be answered fully, accurately and truthfully. Witnesses found to be giving false or misleading evidence may be in contempt of Parliament and subject to penalty.

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

Departmental officers may approach the table during the hearing to provide information to the witnesses if requested, by leave of myself. However, written communication to witnesses can only be provided via officers of the PAEC secretariat. Members of the public gallery cannot participate in the committee's proceedings in any way.

Members of the media are to observe the following guidelines: cameras must remain focused only on the persons speaking; operators must not pan the public gallery, the committee or witnesses; and filming and recording must cease immediately at the completion of the hearing.

I now 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. This portfolio obviously has a lot of bipartisan support because of the nature of the portfolio, so I appreciate that. The government has made a number of significant new commitments to commemorate veterans' service and to support their health and wellbeing: \$1 million will honour and recognise the service and sacrifice of Victoria's Vietnam veterans during the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War in 2016; a further \$400 000 over the next four years to the Victorian branch of the RSL will provide welfare support to the veteran community through direct welfare activities to combat social isolation, advocacy and information services; and \$1.2 million over the next four years to provide free public transport to all TPI and EDA ex-service members living in Victoria. The Minister for Public Transport is responsible for implementing this initiative in consultation with my department.

Over and above all of this, the government will also provide a further \$5 million over the four years to support Anzac centenary initiatives. My department has already commenced work on implementing these initiatives, and I have myself held discussions with members of the ex-service community about them. I feel very privileged to have been appointed the Minister for Veterans at this very important time of commemoration of the First World War 2014 to 2018. I am very impressed by the range and scope of the activities in the veterans sector and have been meeting with key stakeholders such as the shrine, Victorian Veterans Council, RSL and Vietnam Veterans Association, to name a few, to understand their roles better and to understand their priorities and current issues impacting on the veteran community. I am encouraged by their good work, particularly the volunteer support for these organisations.

I recently returned from the 2015 dawn service in Gallipoli with 80 students and 18 chaperones and was pleased to see that the Anzac Day commemorations here in Victoria had record-breaking attendances, on which we intend to continue to build. We continue to deliver great initiatives to commemorate and educate the community, particularly the younger generation, about Australia's service history, with programs such as the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize and through the Victorian government's commemoration and education grants program. I am also pleased to advise that the Victorian Veterans Council is working on a new study to review the state of the sector to help the government strategically plan into the future. I expect the review to be presented to me later this year.

The government continues to engage younger Victorians to assist them to better understand the service history of our veterans. We continue the Premier's Spirit of Anzac Prize, including the overseas study tour. In the recent school holidays 12 students embarked on the overseas study tour, visiting Lemnos, Gallipoli and the Western Front, led by Sharon Knight, the member for Wendouree, who is also a member of the Victorian Anzac Centenary Committee. Sixteen regional finalists will soon depart for a Canberra study tour. The Victorian government also sent 98 Victorian students and chaperones to the dawn service at Gallipoli. I had the pleasure of meeting up with the 80 students and 18 chaperones for a visit with the secondary school students of the Anatolia High School in Gallipoli, Turkey, on the day prior to the dawn service.

I have met the students who are participating in these events. These are truly impressive students who have now returned home and are sharing their stories with their local communities and schools. The feedback from both initiatives has been extremely positive. I would like to share a quote from one of the students, Cameron Bowman from Stawell Secondary College:

It was amazing to be at the place that contributed so much to our national identity and to try and compare the stories of what our soldiers went through to the serene landscape that is there today.

That is very powerful. Those words are from a young man who had the honour of going and seeing firsthand the special occasion of the centenary commemorations and being there at that location. What wonderful words he has provided.

The government is undertaking a range of initiatives to mark the Anzac centenary and the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli landings. These include 98 grants through the Anzac centenary range of grants and community grants; programs providing \$1.4 million to a range of community ex-service organisations and cultural institutions across Victoria; funding of \$100 000, with a further \$130 000 from the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund, towards a new Australian-Turkish Friendship Memorial in Kings Domain, which was opened by the Premier just prior to Anzac Day. The highly successful Anzac centenary roadshow, Victoria's Journey of Remembrance, travelled the length and breadth of the state and will continue to do so, educating young people and communities about the centenary and showing them how they can get involved. I understand that you participated, Mr Smith, in the roadshow held in Kew on 20 April. You participated in that.

**Mr T. SMITH** — That is right.

**Mr EREN** — It was fantastic. Two trams were decorated with images from Victoria's First World War experiences, including the multicultural nature of Victoria's service. These trams will run for four to five months, with super-stops at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Domain interchange decorated with quotes, images and stories. In the lead-up to Anzac Day, images illuminated the facade of the National Gallery of Victoria, gaining some extremely positive feedback.

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the excellent support received from the Victorian Anzac Centenary Committee, and I was very glad when former Premier Ted Baillieu accepted my invitation to continue as the chair of that committee. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Minister. I might kick off with the first question. In the context of the 2015–16 budget, in your own portfolio responsibilities can you inform the committee how this budget acquits *Labor's Financial Statement*?

**Mr EREN** — I am pleased to say that the 2015–16 budget delivers in full the government's election commitments for veterans and more. In budget paper 3, page 92, the budget has delivered on two major investments in the veterans sector: \$1 million to support a range of activities to honour and recognise Victoria's Vietnam veterans on the 50th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan, including commemorative and educational activities; and \$400 000 over the next four years to the Victorian branch of the RSL to provide welfare support to the veteran community. In addition, the budget also provides a further \$5 million over four years, between 2015 and 18, to support Anzac centenary commemorations, including the Anzac centenary roadshow and the centenary grants program. In total, over the next four years \$6.4 million has been committed in my veterans portfolio.

In addition the government has also made a commitment to provide \$1.2 million over four years to progress its election commitment to extend free public transport to all totally permanently injured or extreme disablement

adjustment ex-service personnel living in Victoria, and that is in budget paper 3, page 20. This makes a total new investment of \$7.6 million to support Victoria's veteran community. My department has already commenced work on implementing these initiatives, and I have myself held discussions with members of the ex-service community about them.

On 18 August 2016 we will commemorate the 50th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan. The government has committed \$1 million to honour and recognise the service and sacrifices of Victoria's Vietnam veterans. Earlier this year I met with the state presidents of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia and the RSL to discuss their 50th anniversary commemorative activities, and these include a commemorative service and march on Vietnam Veterans Day 2016, the 50th anniversary of the battle of Long Tan; a commemoration service held at St Paul's Cathedral in Melbourne; a history competition for year 9 and 10 secondary students resulting in a tour of Vietnam; a reception incorporating the Vietnamese community in Victoria; and activities held at the National Vietnam Veterans Museum in Phillip Island.

Since the budget was handed down my department has already met with the leadership of the Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia in Victoria to discuss how the government can best support their very thoughtful commemorative program. As I said earlier, the government has committed a further \$400 000 over the next four years to the Victorian branch of the RSL to provide welfare support for the veterans community, including welfare assistance, social activities to combat social isolation, advocacy and information services. This was a further election commitment on which we have delivered.

While the welfare of our returned service people is first and foremost the responsibility of the federal government, the Victorian government is committed to ensuring that we do everything our resources permit to support veterans living in Victoria. This \$400 000 will go to the Victorian branch of the RSL to support the fantastic work they do in providing welfare support to the veteran community right across the state, including welfare assistance, social activities to combat social isolation, advocacy and information services. Of course this investment is over and above the support the government already provides to our veteran community through programs and projects such as the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund, state-based concessions and the accommodation project for veterans.

We have not only delivered on our commitments in *Labor's Financial Statement*, we have gone beyond them, providing an additional \$5 million over the next four years for the Anzac centenary commemorations. This money will ensure that initiatives such as our highly successful Anzac centenary roadshow, Victoria's Journey of Remembrance, can continue. The Journey of Remembrance has travelled the length and breadth of the state and will continue to do so, educating young people in communities about the centenary and showing them how they can get involved. I understand that Mr Smith participated in that roadshow, and this new investment will also ensure that the Anzac centenary major grants program can continue to support Victorian communities and institutions to mark the Anzac centenary.

Already 18 major grants have been approved by the Anzac centenary to a total of \$861 430. Approved grants include 100 000 to the Turkish RSL sub-branch, with a further 130 allocated to the Multicultural Community Infrastructure Fund to erect in Kings Domain the Australian-Turkish Friendship Memorial; \$100 000 to the Victorian Arts Centre to deliver the production of *Black Diggers*, depicting the contribution —

**The CHAIR** — I ask the minister to conclude his answer.

**Mr EREN** — In concluding, there are a number of projects that I can list, and these are very worthy projects. As well as supporting future commemorative activities, this new \$5 million investment in the Anzac centenary will support the continuation of the very successful Victorian government Anzac centenary website. Just lastly, this website has become a critical hub for all centenary activities, particularly in the lead-up to Anzac Day 2015. The website listed over 300 Anzac Day services. It proved to be very popular and recorded over 388 000 page views in April and 60 000 views on 24 April alone. I could go on, but I will leave it there.

**Mr MORRIS** — Minister, BP3, page 303, has particular reference to the shrine and the Galleries of Remembrance project that opened last year. I understand that in addition to both of us supporting the same football team, as amazing as it might seem we have something else in common — we both had grandfathers who served at Gallipoli.

**Mr EREN** — Yes.

**Mr MORRIS** — But I am sure they were on different sides.

**Mr EREN** — They were, but respected each other very much.

**Mr MORRIS** — Absolutely. Minister, the former government provided the second half of the \$45 million needed to complete the project on the understanding that the commonwealth would continue to be pressed to provide its \$22.5 million share. Can I ask: have you continued talks with the commonwealth on this issue?

**Mr EREN** — Thank you for your question. Again it is very frustrating to be mentioning another tier of government and their inability to come up with the goods, so to speak. From our perspective I am actually pleased that you asked this question, because I am pleased to report that on 23 December 2014 the federal Minister for Veterans' Affairs wrote to Premier Andrews providing a guarantee that the state would be reimbursed. I say that on occasions we do get frustrated, but I think that where we can find some common ground we do, and hopefully that \$22.5 million toward the \$45 million cost of the Galleries of Remembrance project will be honoured and committed to by the federal government.

My department is obviously now working with the commonwealth government and the Department of Veterans' Affairs to reimburse the state for the first instalment, and the shrine continues to conduct a major fundraising appeal to ensure that it is able to manage the future costs associated with the new Galleries of Remembrance. The shrine is such an important place that so many millions of people over time visit. I have been there on a number of occasions now since I have been the minister, and prior to being the minister. We should showcase what we have got. That is why it is so important. On occasions we do have our disagreements and arguments with the other tiers of government, but on this occasion we were given a commitment, and we were certainly hoping they would honour that commitment.

**Mr MORRIS** — Minister, if the money does come through, what will that money be committed to?

**Mr EREN** — It will be part of going towards the cost of the development that we are talking about. That money will be dedicated to the shrine. I can definitely guarantee you that those moneys that have been committed to will be totally utilised for the purpose that they have been allocated for.

**Mr MORRIS** — Chair, could I seek some clarification, with your indulgence?

**The CHAIR** — Yes.

**Mr MORRIS** — The money has in fact been provided and spent in the last year by the former government. This is a reimbursement, and it is not feasible for it to be recommitted to the project.

**Mr EREN** — Yes. The departments are working together in relation to this. I am being informed that the moneys that have been committed will be utilised for the purpose that they were designed for. So we are working through the budgetary process to make sure that the allocations are allocated in the way that they were meant to be.

**Mr MORRIS** — Can we get some further advice on that when that work is completed?

**The CHAIR** — Yes. Could the minister provide some further advice to the committee — just take it as a question on notice — at a point in time when that becomes realised?

**Mr EREN** — Sure, I am happy to do that.

**Ms SHING** — Thank you, Minister. Good afternoon to you and to your departmental representatives. I am in fact asking this question on behalf of Dr Carling Jenkins, who was unable to remain for the balance of the hearings this afternoon. Dr Carling-Jenkins has drawn my attention to budget paper 3, pages 92 and 96. Minister, if I could take you there, and specifically to the veteran welfare grants to the RSLs, Dr Carling-Jenkins has expressed some concerns about the quantum of these grants in that item. The question was: what is this funding in fact filling? What will the grants be allocated to in very general terms, and what grants are needed? Specifically, what are the needs of veterans that are not being covered under the current funding envelope and arrangements? Minister, could you detail that? Again, just to take you back to refresh your memory: pages 92 and 96 of budget paper 3.

**Mr EREN** — Thank you very much. It is a very important question that you ask, and veterans' welfare is one of those things which include homelessness. It is a problem. We are finding that particularly contemporary veterans are really struggling in some instances. They have just come back from service and psychologically they need some assistance, and sometimes they fall into a trap of being homeless. Clearly that is a real issue.

While the welfare of our returned service people is first and foremost the responsibility, again, of the federal government, the Victorian government is certainly committed to ensuring that we do everything our resources permit to support veterans living in Victoria. The government provides welfare support to our veteran communities through programs and projects such as the ANZAC Day Proceeds Fund, state-based concessions and the accommodation project for veterans. The government has committed a further \$400 000 over the next four years to the Victorian branch of the RSL to provide welfare support to the veteran community, including welfare assistance, social activities to combat social isolation, and advocacy and information services.

I am pleased to report that the Victorian Veterans Council, which advises me on veterans issues, has commenced a review of the state of the veteran sector in Victoria, and I am really looking forward to the conclusion of that. This review will help the government strategically plan for current and future needs of the veterans community. I expect the review to be presented to me later this year.

Of course there are other proceeds that we assist organisations with. In 2014 the government provided nearly \$440 000 worth of grants to RSLs, Legacy, the Vietnam Veterans Association, Carry On (Victoria) and other ex-service organisations to provide welfare assistance, social activities to combat social isolation, and advocacy and information services to veterans. Over \$300 000 of this funding was distributed to ex-service organisations to provide direct welfare assistance to veterans and their families, and \$76 313 was provided to the RSL to assist with the operational costs of regional veterans centres in Victoria. These centres are an avenue for veterans, young and not so young, to seek advice on their entitlements or counselling support.

On occasions we do get a bit frustrated. I know the federal government has committed to some of the developments at the shrine, but there are other issues that really the federal government needs to pick up on. I know that they have cut their services.

**The CHAIR** — The minister to conclude his answer.

**Mr EREN** — Sure. As usual, we will invite ex-service organisations to submit proposals for 2015 funding later this year, and once they are available, the amounts as determined from this year's Anzac Day sporting events.

The crisis accommodation: I wanted to just quickly touch on that. The government has allocated \$1.35 million to a veterans accommodation project to build five units in Richmond for veterans in crisis who need short to medium-term accommodation. That project is progressing well and will be completed by the end of 2015. I am looking forward to that.

**Ms SHING** — Thank you, Minister. Just on a very quick supplementary, I wanted also to draw your attention to the amounts in those line items at pages 92 and 96. I wonder whether they include CPI increases built into those amounts for the budget and forward estimates period?

**Mr EREN** — When you look at the ratio of investment that we have made into the veterans portfolio, we have put in, in substantial terms, more money than the previous government. Leading up to Anzac Day, the 100th — centenary — commemorations, obviously the budget was beefed up to a certain extent. So we have put ample amounts of money in to make sure that the veterans portfolio is well looked after to provide the commitments that we made leading up to the election. Clearly those commitments were well received by the wider veterans community. That is why the \$400 000 that we have allocated to the RSLs will go a long way to making sure that that money is distributed in a just and fair manner to those most in need. I am fairly confident that the budget that we have provided going forward is going to accommodate all of the service organisations to cater for some of the inadequacies that exist from the federal arena.

**Ms SHING** — Thank you, Minister. Thank you, Chair, for allowing me to ask those questions on behalf of Dr Carling-Jenkins.

**The CHAIR** — No problems. I would like to thank the witnesses for their attendance today: the Minister for Veterans, the Honourable John Eren, MP; and Mr Joshua Puls, director of the veterans branch, and Ms Angela Bourke, manager of the veterans branch, both from the Department of Premier and Cabinet. I think there was only one question on notice, which related to the shrine. If that information could be provided when you are in receipt, that would be great.

**Mr EREN** — Sure.

**Committee adjourned.**