

# CORRECTED VERSION

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into budget estimates 2011–12

Melbourne — 16 May 2011

#### Members

Mr N. Angus

Mr P. Davis

Ms J. Hennessy

Mr D. Morris

Mr D. O'Brien

Mr M. Pakula

Mr R. Scott

Chair: Mr P. Davis

Deputy Chair: Mr M. Pakula

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Ms V. Cheong

#### Witnesses

Mr H. Delahunty, Minister for Veterans' Affairs,

Mr Y. Blacher, Secretary,

Mr G. Forck, Chief Finance Officer,

Dr P. Hertan, Deputy Secretary, Veterans Unit, and

Mr D. Roberts, Manager, Veterans Unit, Department of Planning and Community Development.

**The CHAIR** — I now welcome Mr David Roberts, manager, veterans unit, Department of Planning and Community Development, and Ms Sarah Lawson, senior policy officer, Department of Planning and Community Development, who will be operating the presentation only.

I call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the veterans affairs portfolio.

**Overheads shown.**

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — Thank you, Chair, and again thank you to the members of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. This government recognises the enormous contribution that Victoria's veterans have made, and continue to make, to our community through their service in conflicts around the world. We are committed to passing on the stories of their wartime experiences to future generations. We are committed to commemorating their sacrifices and to supporting their health and wellbeing. We are committed to respecting and honouring their service and sacrifice, not just on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day but on every day of the year.

There have been a number of significant achievements across the veterans affairs portfolio over the 2010–11 financial year. Ten students have recently returned from the seventh Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize study tour, which this year visited Gallipoli and the Western Front. The Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize competition and associated overseas study tour are vital to keeping the memory of veterans' service and sacrifice alive across the generations.

More than 1100 year 9 and year 10 students from schools across Victoria have now participated in the statewide competition since it commenced in 2004. Our government is committed to ensuring the continued success of this important program, which is why we have recently announced \$100 000 per year over four years to better promote the Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize competition.

In 2010–11, 50 projects with a grant value of more than \$210 000 were funded through the Restoring Community War Memorials grants program. This investment has supported a range of initiatives across the state, including the restoration of the World War I honour roll at Echuca Primary School and extensive conservation work at the Caulfield Park war memorial. Consistent with previous years, a significant proportion of these projects have been undertaken in rural and regional Victoria. In the 2011–12 budget the government was pleased to commit more than \$1 million over the next four years to this program. The government's investment in the Restoring Community War Memorials grants program is just one way in which we are continuing to ensure that Victoria's war-related heritage remains a focus of community pride for future generations.

The 2010–11 financial year has also seen significant progress on initiatives to remember the commitment and sacrifice of veterans. We have so far recorded a further 40 stories from our veteran community through the In Our Words digital storytelling project in partnership with ACMI and the Shrine of Remembrance. We have also achieved great progress on the Victorian Veterans Virtual Museum, which is now nearing completion. It will include a searchable war heritage inventory database, digitised unit histories of Victorian battalions that served during World War I as well as In Our Words digital stories. It is anticipated that the virtual museum will be completed later this year.

We have supported the Victorian Veterans Council in making more than \$300 000 worth of grants from the Victorian Veterans Fund. The Victorian Veterans Council has also distributed, from the Anzac Day Proceeds Fund, grants worth more than \$360 000 for 28 projects in support of veterans' welfare. We have also celebrated the second Veteran Community award, which was presented to Mr John Vincent, OAM, for his service to the veteran community during Seniors Week. Also the works that have been undertaken at Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital to deliver \$17 million in specialist facilities for veterans are nearing completion.

We are continuing to work with the Shrine of Remembrance regarding the changes recommended by the State Services Authority. In this context, earlier this year we drafted the Shrine of Remembrance Amendment Bill. It has successfully passed through both houses of Parliament and will come into effect in the near future. We have also made \$50 000 available in the budget to support the redevelopment of the shrine's website, which will strengthen the shrine's marketing and online educational activities.

In 2011–12 the government will address a range of priorities around remembering the service and sacrifice of veterans, preparing for the centenary of Anzac, passing the baton to a new generation and veterans' health and wellbeing. The government believes the brave service of our Vietnam War veterans should be remembered. We are proud to have committed to provide funding for stage 2 of the Vietnam Veterans Commemorative Walk in Seymour.

The centenary of Anzac is from 2014 to 2018 and will be a significant national and international commemorative event. That is why we are investing \$2.1 million over four years towards Victoria's preparation for the centenary of Anzac through two key initiatives. The first initiative will see more than \$1 million over four years invested to continue the highly successful Restoring Community War Memorials grants program. Our second initiative will address the increasing interest in our state's war history in the lead-up to the centenary of Anzac. We are investing more than \$1 million over four years for statewide commemorative and educational activities, including additional support for the Anzac Day march.

The government acknowledges the importance of passing Victoria's war history on to future generations. Educating younger Victorians about the service history of our veterans will ensure the continued commemoration of their efforts. That is why we have committed \$100 000 per year over four years from 2011–12 to provide additional support and material to better promote the Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize. The Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize inspires young people to honour and remember the men and women who have served Australia and fought in defence of our democratic values. This additional funding will be used to more closely engage with schools across Victoria to raise awareness of the prize and to encourage greater participation in the competition.

As Victoria's largest and most visited memorial, the Shrine of Remembrance plays an important role in educating our community about our state's war history. That is why we are pleased to have announced \$50 000 in the 2011–12 budget to support the redevelopment of the Shrine of Remembrance website.

This government has pledged to care for the health and wellbeing of Victorian veterans. That is why we have committed \$2 million over four years from the Victorian Property Fund to develop a housing project that addresses the unique needs of the most vulnerable members of our veteran community.

**The CHAIR** — You have placed a great deal of weight on the commitment, for which I commend the government and indeed the previous government, to the Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize, which is a very important initiative. While my question does not go to that award specifically, I just want to make a link. One of the things that I am aware of, having made representations to the former Premier about it, is that that school competition has never undertaken a state tour to Kokoda, where you and I have separately attended.

**Mr MORRIS** — You are not the only ones in this room.

**The CHAIR** — No, and Mr Morris was, I think, in your party.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — That is correct.

**The CHAIR** — The reason I allude to that is that at the time that we had the 39th battalion on the Kokoda Track the average age was about 18½ years of age, not much older than the recipients of the current Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize. The population of Australia was a little over a third of what it currently is. I just wondered, in relation to the current predictions concerning population growth, how have they shaped the budget in your portfolio of veterans affairs in respect to 2011–12 and the out years for your portfolio?

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — I will deal with the last part of the question first, if I could, in dealing with the population. Our government's work continues, with the veterans affairs unit, to be shaped by the significant demographic changes that are occurring within our veterans community. Much of this relates to the ageing of our World War II veterans, who now have an average age of 86 and whose numbers are rapidly declining. As the number of older veterans declines, it is vital to preserve the veteran-related heritage and plan for the centenary of Anzac so our veterans' stories can live on into the future. That is why our budget has committed \$2.1 million over four years to prepare for the centenary of Anzac, including \$1 million to support the restoration of community war memorials and honour rolls right across Victoria.

This budget also provides support to the Shrine of Remembrance to educate the wider community about our veterans' history through a one-off allocation of \$50 000 for the redevelopment of its website. We are also continuing to record the stories of our veterans through the In Our Words digital storytelling project, which has so far collected the personal testimonies of over 120 veterans.

While the ranks of our older veterans are thinning, recent research indicates that veterans of more recent campaigns, as well as war widows and the disabled children of veterans, are in need of specialist accommodation. That is why the government has made available in this budget up to \$2 million over four years to support the development of a housing project that caters for the accommodation needs of these vulnerable Victorians, subject to the development of a business case and a formal application to the Victorian Property Fund administered by Consumer Affairs Victoria.

I agree with you that Kokoda is a special place and a story that I do not believe enough is known about. It is important to remember that at Gallipoli we were fighting alongside the English, but in Kokoda we had Australians fighting to protect Australia because New Guinea was part of Australia at that stage. I was pleased to do the walk with Mr Morris, and it was a great experience, an experience that I would love to think some of our children under the Spirit of Anzac prize could attend. As it happened, this year when our students were planning to go to Gallipoli and Egypt, that did not happen because of concerns with security. They were moved to the Western Front in northern France. Again I think that is a concern we have in going to New Guinea for these trips. I agree that it is a story that needs to be told. We have to remember that these soldiers, as you rightly said, were around the age of 19 and they were outnumbered by the Japanese 6 to 1, but they turned them around. We have a story that I do not believe is well enough known, and it is one that I would like to highlight in my term as veterans affairs minister.

**Mr PAKULA** — Minister, I am referring to page 128 of budget paper 3, and on that page there is an output listed as 'Preparing for the ANZAC centenary and commemorative grants'. Minister, given that the centenary of the commencement of World War I will take place in 2014 and given that Remembrance Day 2014 will fall during the next state election campaign, can you guarantee that all programs, all initiatives and all materials that are funded as part of this important event will be bipartisan and above politics?

**The CHAIR** — That is a very interesting question. Thank you, Deputy Chair, for that question.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — In my time as shadow Minister for Veterans' Affairs and since the establishment of the veterans affairs department by the previous government I think there has been bipartisan support for this very important work that is done by the veterans affairs unit and the commemoration and education programs. As you have rightly said, the year 2014 will mark the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, and 2015 is the 100th anniversary of the landing of Australian troops at Anzac Cove. The Anzac centenary will be a significant national and international commemorative event. Although the centenary is three years away, as you have highlighted, substantial progress is being made towards ensuring that this historic anniversary is commemorated appropriately. The commonwealth government is currently considering a report from the National Commission on the Commemoration of the Anzac Centenary which includes recommendations about the commemorative initiatives and key activities for 2014 to 2018.

Here in Victoria the government has committed to ensuring that the Anzac centenary is commemorated in a fitting manner. In this budget we have announced funding of \$2.1 million over four years, which will help our preparation for the centenary of Anzac. This investment includes more than \$1 million over four years for the restoration of Victorian community war memorials and honour rolls. These local memorials are important civic landmarks which are a focus of shared commemorative events, particularly in rural and regional Victoria. Supporting the restoration will help ensure that the spirit of Anzac lives on in the community around the state.

Our investment in preparing for the centenary of Anzac will also see more than \$1 million over four years go towards supporting a range of commemoration and education initiatives, including support for the Anzac Day march and the establishment of the Victorian committee for the commemoration of Anzac. We will of course work closely with all members of Parliament, the Victorian Veterans Council and ex-service organisations to determine priorities for the Victorian centenary activities.

**Mr PAKULA** — Back to my question about the bipartisan nature that you acknowledge as having been the way in the past, am I to take it that the answer to my question of whether that bipartisan approach will continue is yes?

**Mr O'BRIEN** — Can you guarantee that all commitments in the last election were —

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Mr O'Brien.

**Mr O'BRIEN** — in respect to the conventions?

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — That has always been the case, and I think it has continued even in the short time that I have been the minister. Yes, it will continue.

**Mr PAKULA** — Thank you.

**Mr MORRIS** — Minister, I take you to page 273 of budget paper 3 and in particular the expected outcome for veterans affairs and the note there saying that the 'expected outcome is higher than the 2010–11 target due to one-off funding for additional grants (Seymour Vietnam veterans walk)'. Can you indicate to the committee the extent of the government's commitment to this initiative?

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — This government recognises that Victorians owe a debt of gratitude to all our veterans for their service and sacrifice, and we believe the bravery of our Vietnam veterans should be remembered. I am a person of that vintage, so I know a lot of people who served in Vietnam, were injured in Vietnam and have come back with some scars from that experience.

That is why we as a government are pleased to have delivered on our election promise by committing \$1.2 million towards the Seymour Vietnam veterans walk in this financial year. This project will be the first of its kind in Australia to recognise all Australian personnel who served in the Vietnam War. It is being managed by the Mitchell Shire Council with the support of the Mitchell sub-branch of the Vietnam Veterans Association and significantly has the RSL state president, Major-General David McLachlan, as its patron. The project also commemorates the strong involvement the Seymour district has had with the Australian Defence Force, in particular during the Vietnam era when the second recruit training battalion was situated at the nearby Puckapunyal army camp. In March this year I had the pleasure of attending the opening of stage 1 of the memorial walk.

Our investment will provide funding for stage 2 of the commemorative walk. This stage will see the construction of a walk along High Street in Seymour that will be lined by stainless steel tablets featuring the names of all 62 100 who served in Vietnam. It will be a fitting tribute to the veterans of the particularly difficult campaign, many of whom have long struggled with the impact it had on them.

**Mr SCOTT** — Minister, I refer you to page 128 of budget paper 3 and the output 'Preparing for the ANZAC centenary and commemorative grants'. You touched briefly on it in your previous answer to Mr Pakula's question regarding that centenary. You would be well aware of the Shrine of Remembrance's plan, to coincide with the centenary of the Gallipoli landings in 2015, for a \$35 million redevelopment of the galleries of remembrance and the educational centre underneath the shrine, and I ask: will the government be committing funds for this important redevelopment?

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — I thank Mr Scott for his important question. Since early 2000 the shrine trustees have undertaken significant developments at the shrine. With the completion of the visitors centre in 2003 and of the educational centre in the undercroft in 2005 the shrine has significantly increased its numbers of visitors and its support to schools through its education programs. I am aware that the shrine trustees have discussed further plans to redevelop the shrine to extend their capacity to deliver public and school-based education programs. I understand these plans involve further redevelopment of the undercroft and the creation of a new gallery, education and exhibition space underground mirroring the developments of the northern side.

The previous government provided the shrine with approximately \$234 000 in funding to assist it to develop the business case and the concept for the proposed project. I have been advised that the trustees are undertaking further work around these plans. This government has yet to receive a formal proposal from the trustees regarding their plans for the redevelopment of the shrine.

**Mr ANGUS** — Minister, I refer you to page 272 of budget paper 3 where there is noted a key output for the veterans affairs portfolio being to strengthen commemoration of our veterans' service within the wider community and especially among younger people. Minister, how will this budget deliver on the government's commitment to pass on veterans' stories to future generations?

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — This is an important question, and it is important to pass the baton to the younger generation. As I said earlier, as our veterans community grow older it is vital to ensure that their service, sacrifice and bravery are not forgotten. The government is supporting a number of initiatives to keep alive the memory of our veterans for future generations. We will extensively promote the Premier's Spirit of Anzac prize across Victoria to give more young people, more young Victorians, the opportunity to participate in the competition and learn about our veterans. The Spirit of Anzac prize competition challenges students in years 9 and 10 to research the service history of their local communities and to reflect on the values exemplified by those who landed at Anzac Cove in 1915. As I discovered when I met the state finalists and winners of this year's competition, this program really does engage younger Victorians with stories of our veterans' deeds and experiences in a meaningful and powerful way.

The government is also providing a one-off grant of \$50 000 to the Shrine of Remembrance to support an upgrade of the shrine's website. The Shrine of Remembrance already plays a significant role in educating our community about Victoria's service history. Every year thousands of school students visit the shrine for commemorative events and to participate in education programs about Australia's involvement in war and peacekeeping. The redevelopment of the shrine's website will provide more opportunities for these students to keep learning online about Victoria's war-related heritage and our veteran community once they return to their classrooms. The upgraded site will also offer a range of multimedia resources which will be of particular benefit to students who, for a range of reasons, may be unable to visit the shrine in person.

In this budget the government has also committed more than \$2 million over four years to prepare for the centenary of Anzac, which will help ensure that our Anzac heritage lives on for future generations. In addition, we are continuing to support In Our Words, a digital storytelling project which has so far collected stories from 120 veterans across the state, including from World War II veterans and former prisoners of war. These often moving short films are a permanent record of our veterans' deeds and a valuable resource for engaging young people with our service history, and therefore continuing to pass on the baton to the next generation.

**The CHAIR** — As somebody of that generation whose fathers were involved in the Second World War I am very conscious of the great work which is being done to commemorate untold stories and the work of your department. I just want to say that as a note of appreciation.

That includes the consideration of the budget estimates for the portfolios of sport and recreation and veterans affairs. I thank the minister and departmental officers for their attendance today. It has been a useful session. Where questions were taken on notice and where there are unasked questions the committee will follow up with you in writing at a later date. The committee requests that written responses to those matters be provided within 21 days. I remind everybody on the committee that we are back here at 10.00 a.m. tomorrow.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** — I thank you, Chair, and the members of the committee.

**Committee adjourned.**