

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO VETERAN SUPPORT – A CRITICAL COMMENT ON THE DRAFT REPORT

Ten days before Christmas, the Productivity Commission issued a draft report on its inquiry into the compensation and rehabilitation of veterans. Frankly, the report comes up with some disquieting recommendations.

- In resorting to large scale ‘deck chair’ organisational changes, the report recommends the abolition of DVA & the transfer of the veteran support function into Defence – it has already attracted much public attention & publicity in the media. For many of us who have spent years in the Defence bureaucracy, it is difficult to see how amidst the fundamentality of Defence’s charter to prepare & engage in warfighting, the administration of veteran support could find a place of priority.
- In recommending large scale organisational changes, the report does not estimate costings!
- More worryingly, the organisational changes subtly mask the more devastatingly serious implications of the Commission’s recommendations that effectively withdraw special compensation for veterans of war. Effectively, the Commission doesn’t believe that the trauma of war service calls for any specific form of compensation or health support service beyond that encountered by a serviceperson in peace. This will directly result in contemporary veterans with war service being denied their rights.
- The Commission also recommends that use of the ‘gold card’ be discontinued beyond existing clients on the basis that it does not target veterans or lead to their wellbeing! Surely, the Commission understands that the ‘gold card’ targets & directly supports the wellbeing of some 300,000 of the most maligned of all veterans namely Vietnam veterans & their dependents.
- To be fair, there are some sensible recommendations largely directed at improving the transition of service people from Defence to civil life. Also welcomed are some attempts to streamline legislation.

In not recognising the special needs of veterans of war, the commission resorts to an extraordinary degree of rationalization that treats all injury as having the same consequence where ever it occurs & in whatever circumstances whether on active service or in peace.– ‘an injury is an injury’ is the simplistic notion. Moreover and whilst the Commission agrees that war or warlike service warrants recognition and reward above that provided for peacetime or operational service, it believes that there are deployment allowances, awards and other direct mechanisms for this.

Some of the Commission’s misguided logic may in fact be drawn from the nonsensical view adopted in recent years that a veteran is one who has completed one day of service in the ADF. It’s another case of gross rationalization that leads to a reduction in the perceived worth, respect & value of the war veteran.

The PC is totally misguided in their suggestion that deployment allowance be used as an instrument of compensation for war service – deployment allowance covers risks, hardships associated with deployments & has nothing to do with the essential business of engaging in war with adversaries. They are simply wrong in using risk assessment as an arbiter of determining trauma of war service – it rather fundamentally has to do with engaging with enemy. As a principle, it is wrong to use an allowance as a form of compensation.

For example, how possibly could an allowance payable for the period of a deployment (may be as short as 3 months) provide adequate compensation for latent impairment carrying the trauma of being occasioned during war service but occurring years after the deployment.

Even some of the ex-service organisation submissions made to the Commission miss & confuse this point. The line that ‘the ADF trains for, as it will prosecute, war’ is often raised to suggest that the risks are the same for war as in peace. However, it’s not a matter of risk but rather that in war, the person is committed to engage in armed conflict with all that brings in one’s state of mind, one’s capacity to adapt to use lethal force & one’s acceptance of delivering lethality. Every person who takes up a weapon to engage with an enemy if necessary faces those issues. And for over 100 years, they have been accepted as justifying special compensation. That the PC would wish to overturn the principle represents at the best confused & erroneous thinking & at the worst, a gross form of rationalisation to justify a reduction in levels of compensation & consequent reductions in financial outlays for the veteran community.

So what can be done?

- Firstly, recognise that as a Vietnam veteran, your entitlements are largely not affected by the Commissions’ recommendations. They will continue as long as there is a client base; that is & for example, gold cards will continue until we all die out!
- What we need to recognise is that the future veteran of war will receive no further compensation beyond that of the service person with peacetime service.
- If you are a member of an ex-service organisation such as the RSL, Legacy, VVA, VVF, RAAF Association etc, then make sure your views are passed to your Sub branch or Branch. They are aware of the Commission’s report & will most likely have made submissions.
- If the Commission persists with its draft recommendations, then the veteran community should engage with Ministers & Cabinet to have the draft report not accepted.

.Mac Weller

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