



DEFENCE FORCE WELFARE ASSOCIATION

A member of the Alliance of Defence Service Organisations

REPORT

MEETING WITH MINISTER FOR VETERANS AFFAIRS and OMBUDSMAN

Thursday 25 July 2019

Meeting with Minister Chester

I was accompanied to the meeting by Meg Green (War Widows Guild) and Alf J. It was a frank and open discussion on several of the current issues we are addressing.

I began my comments by supporting and acknowledging the work of DVA and Liz Cosson. The impact on the staff due to recent bad press was discussed. Major points of discussion were as follow:

- a. **ADSO Inc.** I stated that ADSO is in the process of incorporating as an entity. Further that such a move should indicate to government and the bureaucracy that the days are past when such comments as, *'there are too many ESOs and we don't know who to talk to'*, are gone. I encouraged him and his office to speak to ADSO as there is a depth of expertise amongst the member ESOs that is not evident elsewhere. In the first instance, speak with Alf or me to be directed to the 'expert' in an area or issue. NOTE – I expect that such will be the case as ADSO Inc develops its structure and processes.

I indicated that I and ADSO generally have a developing a positive relationship with Greg Melick, National President of the RSL, which augers well for the future of the veteran voice. The Minister noted this comment.

- b. **Productivity Report.** I made the point that we (DFWA) will be taking a strategic view in our response to the Report as we see this as a 'once in a lifetime' opportunity to address the future of veteran care here in Australia. The DFWA response will be sent to The Hon Josh Frydenberg MP, Treasurer, who established the Inquiry. Copies will also go to the Minister for Veterans Affairs and to the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The Minister strongly urged that a response should be with the Minister NLT six weeks away. He mentioned that work has already begun on various recommendations in the Report, particularly those of a financial nature. Noting that the Commissioners did not cost many of their recommendations.

- c. **DFRDB Inquiry.** This proved to be an interesting discussion as the Minister agreed that there were 'other' issues outside of the Ombudsman commutation inquiry that would need to be addressed in time. I mentioned that there was a move to draft ToRs for such an inquiry. However, after discussion it became evident that without knowing what these other issues were, the Minister's view was that ToRs and a separate inquiry at this time would be problematic.

It was agreed that in my visit to the Ombudsman later that day I would seek an understanding of the 'commutation' inquiry and what, if any, were the other issues that were being proffered by those who had made submissions. The Minister was agreeable to examine the other issues and assess what further action on them was needed when they are known. A good plan!!

- d. **Military/Veterans Covenant Bill.** The Covenant Bill remains in the Senate and has been held over because of other legislation e.g. Farm Drought, Counterterrorism, and other measures. I proffered that a 'no disadvantage' clause was still needed and DFWA was lobbying to have on included.

The Minister was interested in the views and keen to continue to dialogue – a positive sign

Meeting with the Ombudsman

At 2.00pm the same day I, Alf, Kerry Mellor and Meg Green met with the Ombudsman's team tasked with inquiring into DSFRDB commutation. It was a positive meeting. In attendance were Paul Pfitzner (Lead Inquirer), Amie Meers, Kevin Geddes and Bradley Marler. The following was discussed:

- a. Paul P. stressed that the Inquiry was independent of Government with the focus on DFRDB commutation.
- b. Over 3,400 submissions have been received. This is the most they have received for any inquiry.
- c. Many original documents and paperwork have been received.
- d. "Yes", other issues have been identified in many submissions and these will be separately noted. This followed a request from me to isolate them for the purposes of a separate exercise once the final report has been made public. Submissions from DVA and Defence had also been received.

During the hour-long discussion period we were able to stress that DFWA, along with its ADSO partners, welcomed the Ombudsman's inquiry albeit that we had hoped for a wider one taking in all the issues that the veterans' had sought redress for many years.

Paul F proffered an understanding but stated that the Ombudsman's powers did not extend to examining Ministerial/Government decisions nor to the way the original legislation was framed. Hence, the inquiry was focused on commutation and whether DFRDB superannuants had been misled in the process of electing to commute.



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