

[SUBMISSION]

For the: **Australian Veterans' Recognition (Putting Veterans and their Families First) Bill 2019**

To: **FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE LEGISLATION SENATE COMMITTEE**

(Name Withheld)

I am grateful for the opportunity to make this submission. I served in the ADF for over 20 years and I was medically discharged in recent years due to service related conditions. I am a DVA Gold Card holder and TPI. I was operationally deployed during my service. I am married to a very long serving member of the ADF. We have a child who now a serving member of the ADF.

I am heavily involved with the online Veteran community through various social media platforms. I like to offer my support and assistance to other Veterans, particularly those who may need help with DVA related issues. Due to this involvement, I believe that I have a deep understanding of the attitudes of Veterans and the prevailing concerns regarding the introduction of the Veteran Covenant and the associated Veteran Card and Veteran Lapel pin.

Definition of A Veteran

The Government's announcement of the Veteran Covenant caused a deep division within the Veteran community. I believe that the foundations for this division were laid previously by the Government's decision to redefine the term Veteran.

Who is a veteran?

Traditionally, the term 'veteran' described former Australian Defence Force (ADF) members who were deployed to serve in operational conflict environments. However, in 2017, a Roundtable of Australian Veterans' Ministers agreed that a veteran would be defined as anyone who has served at least one day in the ADF. As such, for this inquiry we have used the term 'veteran' to cover all current and former serving ADF personnel, whether they were deployed to active conflict or peacekeeping operations or served without being deployed. The veteran community also covers family members.

Source: Productivity Commission Draft Report December 2018

A Better Way to Support Veterans

Page 22

Whilst it is apparent that this definition was meant to ensure that nobody missed out on the ability to access Non Liability Health Care (NLHC) for mental health, due to their length (or lack of) service, it had the effect of tarnishing a term that is held dear by many serving and former serving members who, at the lower end of the Veteran spectrum, at least served their minimum time and at the other end of the spectrum undertook life endangering work and perhaps sustained life changing injuries. For many former servicemen and women, the term Veteran is inextricably linked to their personal identity and where they see their place

in society. To extend the term Veteran to cover anybody who served without regard to the length or quality of their service, is an affront Veterans.

Section 9, Part 3 (2) of the Bill

“(2) The Commonwealth may issue pins, cards or other artefacts to family members of veterans in recognition of:

- (a) the military service of veterans; or
- (b) the demands placed on, and the sacrifices made by, the families of veterans.

Information being shared by members of the Veteran Card implementation team at DVA indicates that all cards issued by DVA will have the word Veteran imprinted on them. This means that War Widow/ers, dependents, cadets and police members, who are Gold Card holders, will be erroneously identified as being Veterans. It also means that an honour that is meant to be given to recognise the service of Veterans is being extended to others who have never served. This is a slap in the face to those who have served or are serving. It is a Veteran Covenant. The Veteran card should be issued only to those who have served. We who have served deserve to have our service recognised and not have the meaning and significance of the card watered down by extending the card to others. We deserve to have something that truly is just for us. The Veteran Covenant recognises the support and sacrifice of families and rightly so. There are, and no doubt will be more, initiatives for supporting and recognising Veteran families.

War Widow/ers and Dependents

War Widow/ers and dependents are already recognised and cared for with the grant of a Gold Card and all the support and concessions that card provides upon the death of a Veteran. Additionally War Widow/ers receive a tax free pension that is free of income and asset testing. This category of people within the Veteran community are very well cared for and honoured.

Police, Cadets and Other Non Veteran DVA Clients

Police, cadets and other people, other than those who served in the ADF, who are DVA clients, are simply not Veterans. Whilst Police are covered under the Veteran's Entitlement Act and are White and Gold Card holders, this is generally due to a single overseas deployment. This is done as a result of their service as Police Officers not as members of the Defence Force. Unlike Veterans, they are not subjected to ongoing training, personal risk, hardship and the limitations imposed by being subject to Defence law for year upon year. Their families had only to endure the inconvenience of a single period of separation and none of the life impacts suffered by Veteran families. Unless my understanding of the Veteran Covenant is flawed, it is not being introduced simply to recognise Veterans for going overseas but rather for their willingness to serve and the nature of their service. The Veteran Covenant should recognise those who enlist in the ADF and serve their country in whatever form that may take. It does not distinguish between domestic or overseas service. Police do not meet the definition of a Veteran in accordance with this Bill. Police are simply

covered under DVA to grant them worker's compensation coverage when serving outside Australia as no other such mechanism for coverage exists. This coverage does not make them a Veteran.

War Widow/er– Case Examples

Apart from the fact that the Veteran Card should be issued only to Veterans there is also a very good reason that the card should not be issued to Widow/ers and dependents. I will outline four different scenarios that I hope will explain the issue. The scenarios given are actual cases that I have become aware of during my online advocacy for Veterans. I have changed each scenario slightly only to deidentify those involved.

Case 1 – Joan is a War Widow. Her deceased husband was a soldier who was Gold Card TPI with DVA. They had one child. He died aged in his 60s after electrocuting himself in the family home. His death was not service related but due to his TPI status, Joan was automatically eligible to be granted War Widow/er status after his death.

Case 2 – Angela is a War Widow. Her deceased husband was a sailor. She was his second wife. They met and married 18 years after he left the Navy. They did not have any children together. Her husband worked in the APS for Defence. He was a Gold Card holder. He died after 7 years of marriage from diabetes and as the condition was accepted as a service condition, his death was deemed service related and Angel was granted War Widow/er status.

Case 3 – Alex is a Widow. Her husband was soldier who had served for 36 years and had many operational deployments. They had three children. Her husband had not claimed for any service related conditions with DVA and died in a motorbike accident. Alex cannot be a War Widow/er as her husband was not a DVA client.

Case 4 – Sally is divorced. She was married to Brent for 22 years. Brent was a sailor. They had four children. They divorced whilst Brent was still serving due to the stress that his deployments had placed on their marriage. Brent has since remarried and he and Sally share custody of their children. If Brent pre-deceases Sally she will not be eligible for War Widow status as they are no longer married.

In all four cases each woman had been the spouse of a Veteran. Case 1,3 and 4 had suffered the hardships placed on Veteran spouses and their families due to the nature of Defence service. Case 2 never experienced the hardships of life as a spouse of serving member due to meeting her husband after his service. Under the proposed Bill, only two of those women will be granted the benefits of the Veteran Card and they are the War Widows in Case 1 and Case 2. The other two women receive nothing. Alex in Case 3 misses out despite her husband's long service due to her husband not having made any claims through DVA and his death could not have been attributed to his service. Does this make her sacrifice as a Veteran spouse throughout his service any less worthy of a Veteran Card than Case 1 or Case 2? With Case 4, Sally misses out on the benefits and recognition of a Veteran Card

because despite being a Veteran spouse for over 20 years, she lost her marriage because of the stress caused by her former husband's Defence service. It is ironic that the Veteran Card is being introduced to recognise the very issue that caused the end of Sally's marriage and she is entitled to nothing. To extend the Veteran Card to War Widows would be a cruel dismissal of the sacrifice of women who find themselves in positions the same as, or similar to, Alex and Sally. It would also create a two-tier system of recognition of Veteran families. Not all War Widow/ers lost their spouses due to service. Not all War Widow/ers were even married to their spouses when they served. Not all spouses who were married to serving Veterans and made sacrifices because of their service are War Widow/ers.

I am not suggesting for a moment that the Veteran Card should be even further extended to encompass every single Veteran spouse and Veteran ex spouse. That would be ridiculous and a potentially impossible administrative burden for DVA. It would also open the scheme up to fraud and rorting. Also where would it end? I have a good friend who has had three wives over the course of more than 40 years' service. Should they all be granted a Veteran Card? Of course not.

Veteran Attitude

By and large the move by Government to introduce the Veteran Covenant is gratefully received by Veterans. There are concerns though. Throughout the many and large Veteran support pages on Facebook, the overwhelming sentiment is that the card should be for the Veteran only. Many Veterans have expressed the view that if the card is, in their eyes, devalued, by extending its issue to non-Veterans, then they want no part of it. Whilst this may sound churlish, it is an indication that Veterans want to be recognised in a way that is exclusive to them alone. I doubt that the Government wishes to alienate the very people they seek to honour. Putting the word Veteran on the card of a non-Veteran is wrong and makes a mockery of those who actually served. If the Government wishes to extend some form of recognition program to anybody other than Veterans, then they should implement a separate program. If what DVA staff has said is true and all cards issued by them will have Veteran embossed on them regardless of whether the card recipient is a Veteran, I can't help but feel that this is a short cut. No doubt this is probably seen by DVA as a way to make administration of the scheme easier and avoid having to take the trouble to issue a number of different types of cards.

Recommendation

I believe that the solution is quite simple. Keep it manageable and keep it fair. Keep the Veteran Card for the Veteran only. By granting cards to Veterans only, there is no grey area, no ambiguity and nobody can claim to be left out. By all means continue to acknowledge and support and honour Veteran families with the Veteran Covenant and specialised programs but do not diminish the term Veteran or demean the service and sacrifice of Veterans by embossing all DVA cards with the word Veteran or by extending the Veteran Card to non Veterans. Yes, Veterans are supported by their families but at the end of the day it was the Veteran who pulled on the boots, did the work and put their health and lives

on the line and in doing so, provided for those families.

Lack of Submission Regarding this Bill

Finally, as a separate but related matter, I would like to address the lack of response to this Bill by the Veteran community and interested parties. At the time of writing there were only nine submissions listed on the APH website. It was not well publicised that submissions were being sought. I personally did not learn that I could make a submission until a few days prior to the closing date. Of course people can visit the website to peruse issues that are calling for submissions but that is not what the general population does. I believe that the Government needs to recognise the way that the dissemination of information has changed in the modern world. With the rise in popularity of social media, that is where people most commonly share and access information. I contend that the Government should, when they seek submissions on an issue, target established social media groups of affected sections of the community. Whilst in the Veteran community there are countless Facebook groups for various associations, Army, Navy, Air Force and DVA clients. It would not be difficult to seek out the larger groups that have an interest in an issue and target them to share information. I have spoken to many people who were unaware that submissions were being sought for this Bill and they have stated they would have made a submission had they known. I don't believe the lack of response is a result of apathy but rather lack of awareness. The Government should encourage the involvement of the community and if a new approach to raising awareness of calls for submissions is needed, it should be considered.

I urge the Committee to consider postponing their final decision on this Bill and calling for more submissions and to do so by reaching out to the Veteran community by all means possible. Even just a further 14 days extension and I am sure there would be many more submissions. Veterans have something to say on this matter, they just didn't know they could.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my submission

07 March 2019