Paul Evans

Senator T. M. Bishop
Senator A. Eggleston
Senator D.J. Fawcett
Senator H. Kroger
Senator S. Ludlam
Senator A. McEwen
Senator the Hon M. Ronaldson
Senator the Hon U. Stephens

Re: Significant mistakes in the data on BEST grants provided by the Department of Veterans' Affairs

14 October 2012

Dear Senators
Almost exactly four months ago, on 17 July 2012, I sent an email to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (FADT) advising of serious problems with an attachment provided by DVA in response to a Question-on-Notice (QON) from Additional Estimates. This attachment listed BEST grants outcomes over the last several years. Two days ago I was informed that DVA had provided a revised attachment. Incredibly, it still contains significant errors.

Even getting to this point has been a long and hard task, requiring several complaints at the lack of action and information. In the process I was told, on 30 August 2012, that:

> 'The Secretariat has no independent authority to remove material from the committee's website or to provide commentary on it. The authority to publish information lies with the committee…'

Apparently, your good selves are completely responsible for this ongoing farce. No public servant, either in DVA or anywhere else, is accountable for ensuring the information on your web-site is correct. Therefore, in order to save time and much stress, I am writing to you directly.

In my original 17 July 2012 email I noted several major and minor mistakes in the data. This email is found in Attachment 1. Back then it only took me a few minutes to notice DVA's biggest mistake, which was to provide the wrong grants schedule for Round 11 (it was a duplicate of round 13). It took a little longer to note the other mistakes. I was also surprised that such an error could make it through several layers of review within DVA. While they have corrected this error, DVA has now managed to botch everything that remains.

Let me start with the smallest mistake. Even though my email would have alerted DVA to the fact that three of their six headings were incorrect, they still managed to get two wrong in their revised reply[1]. I don't know whether you consider that is a pass or fail. They only corrected one-third of their mistakes (fail), but now have two-thirds with the right heading (pass?). Seriously, my email listed these errors, why were they not fixed? Also note that I have no way of fact-checking whether the data for not recommended applicants is correct. On the basis of evidence to date there is a reasonable concern over that data.

Now for the biggest mistakes: In my email I noted that several approved grants were absent from the list provided by DVA for Round 13. My source for comparison was DVA's very own website. They have not made a single correction for Round 13. Both sources are still substantially different. Even though this grant list was finalised well over a year ago, DVA has still not advised the FADT Committee of the correct detail. Attachment 2 contains 16 significant variations in a comparison of DVA's published data and what they provided to the FADT. Mind you, that was what I was able to identify in about half-an-hour. There may well be substantially more errors than what I have noted.

Quite frankly, I am not even sure about the data DVA has provided to the FADT for the previous years. DVA has, for Round 12, now added two substantial grants that were not advised to the FADT in the first instance[2]. Remember, this data was nearly two years old when it was originally provided, so why was it missed? Still more interesting is the revised data and schedule that DVA has now provided for BEST grants in Round 11. It simply doesn't add up.

In the new summary DVA states that Round 11 BEST grants totaled $4.2million (GST incl). Oddly enough, it is wrong. As noted, DVA has totally replaced the incorrect grant schedule. A quick sampling of DVA's web-site data shows that the dollar amount listed for a dozen individual recipients match exactly with the amounts listed for the same recipients in the revised schedule provided to the FADT, so we are not talking a difference caused by the GST calculation. The problem is that the total value of approved BEST grants in Round 11 was nearly $4.5million[3] according to DVA's web-site, an increase of slightly over a cool quarter-of-a-million dollars.

Where were the mistakes made in Round 11? I don't know and I can't be bothered looking. As for the Round 12 data on the web, well, it is a complete mess. Nor should anyone outside of the public service have to sort out these mistakes caused by either incompetence or contempt.

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[1] Round 12 Not Recommended Applicants are listed as for the years 2009-10 (should have been 2010-11). Round 13 Not Recommended Applicants are listed as for the years 20010-11 (should have been 2011-12).

[2] Vietnam Veterans' Federation – ACT Branch Inc for $98,820.
The Legacy Club of Canberra Inc for $25,270

[3] There were 3 disbursements under Round 11 noted on DVA's web-site: The original of $4.4m, plus an additional $111,000.

DVA has a substantial review process. The original answer provided to the FADT would have been prepared by at least an Assistant-Director (EL1), then vetted by the equivalent of a National Manager, then their Divisional Manager (these officers, whatever they call themselves now, are both members of the Senior Executive Service). It would then have gone through DVA's Ministerial Communications area and was probably signed off by a member of the Commission as it was a QoN. It took me thirty seconds to realise that they had stuffed up again when I opened the pdf file. It beggars belief that it made it through all these controls without someone picking it up.

You have to remember I specified the errors in DVA's original schedule. Correcting mistakes someone had identified for you is fairly easy. Yet, it took four months, a lack of response followed by a couple of complaints, only to see another pile of garbage provided to the FADT by DVA. They even made the same mistakes again, which any decent reviewer would have specifically checked that they were corrected.

DVA under Mr Ian Campbell is very good at one thing: Shooting the messenger. I have no doubt that there will be apologies and excuses for what they have done, plus little asides about me. Do your jobs, because DVA is treating the concept of open government with absolute contempt and everybody who deals with them knows it.

Yours sincerely

Paul Evans

Attachment 1

DVA's attachment to their answer to QON 11 to Additional Estimates

Dear Sir or Ma'am

I hope you have been told, but DVA's attachment to their response to QON 11 from Additional Budget Estimates is hopelessly wrong.

Details were requested on BEST grant fundings. According to their answer to the QON, DVA attached a table listing BEST grants for the following years:

Round 11 2009-10
Round 12 2010-11
Round 13 2011-12

Let's start with the little errors:
Round 12 and 13 are both listed as 2010-2011.
The list of 'not recommended applicants' for Round 12 has the heading for the year 2009-12. The year was 2010-11 for Round 12
Similarly, Round 13 lists them as for the year 2010-11.

The big mistakes.
The list for funded applicants for Rounds 11 and 13 are identical. Even the totals are the same:

Applied for amount: $6,713,425
Granted: $3,585,995

DVA also apparently refused exactly the same amounts in both years.

The funny thing was that their answer stated that funding for Round 13 was reduced by $500,000 compared to Round 11. Pretty impressive working of GST to still come up with the same amount ex-GST!

Seriously, you are being treated with contempt. DVA didn't even properly review this document before sending it to you. If someone had just checked the headings they would have realised there was a mistake.

Incidentally, I've checked DVA's website.The grants listed for Round 11 don't come close to matching the document they sent you. I would suggest they have duplicated Round 13 under Round 11 and then called them both Round 11 (2009-10) and Round 13 (but as years 2010-11). Confused? You should try working through it.

Funny thing is, even the grants lists they sent you for Round 13 (but gave it different names) does not exactly match what is listed on DVA's website for Round 13. One example, there are five grants listed as approved for ACT organisations on DVA's website, but only three are listed in the document provided to you. The two extra grants were only approved in August of last year, so perhaps the poor dears had trouble updating their records in the six months between their being approved and DVA answering this question.

Poor show.

I also don't understand why there is no comment on your website as to the need for DVA to provide the correct information. It makes it very hard to do any accurate research.

Regards
Paul Evans

Attachment 2

Comparison between DVA's Web-Site and the Data provided by DVA to the FADT

Amount	Recipient	Notes
$10,000	Regular Defence Force Welfare Association	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$9,679	War Widows Guild of Australia	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$21,234	Vietnam Veterans Association of Australia – Far North Coast Sub-Branch Inc	The revised schedule to the FADT states that this amount was received by the Woolgoolga RSL Sub-Branch. The VVAA FNC is by far the more likely recipient as it is very active. Conversely, Woolgoolga is a sleepy little town just north of Coffs Harbour which is renowned for its Sikh community.
$10,000	The Australian Veterans and Defence Services Council Inc.	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$10,000	Vietnam Veterans Federation of Australia	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$7,756	Partners of Veterans Association of Australia Incl.	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$9,715	Legacy club of Fraser Coast	The amount advised to the FADT was $13,901
???	Veterans Support and Advocacy Service	Very confusing. The web-site data states two grants to this group ($6,300 and $8,645). The FADT states a single, but different amount of $11,586.
$10,000	Naval Association of Australia Inc.	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$1,700	Pine Rivers District RSL Sub-Branch Inc.	FADT data states amount of $6,700
$10,000	The Australian Federation of Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Ex-Service Men and Women Ltd	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT

$10,000	Australian Peacekeeper and Peacemaker Veterans Association Inc	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$10,000	Legacy Australia Council Inc.	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$10,000	Vietnam Veterans' Association of Australia Inc.	On web under Round 13, not advised to the FADT
$1,700	Beachmere RSL Sub-Branch	Advised to FADT under Round 13, not listed on the web
$9022	?????	Advised to the FADT under Round 13 as for the Goodna RSL Sub-Branch. This recipient is not even mentioned on DVA's web-site. Instead, this amount went to the Veterans' Support and Advocacy Service.