



# Media Transcript

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Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of ANZAC  
Special Minister of State

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**\*\*CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY\*\***

## **REMARKS AT THE LEGACY PRESIDENT'S CHANGEOVER LUNCHEON - NEW SOUTH WALES PARLIAMENT HOUSE, SYDNEY**

[Greetings omitted]

It is my great honour to be asked to speak at your changeover luncheon because, like many Australians, I hold Legacy in the highest of regard – so it is a great honour for me to be here.

I know that Legacy, a national organisation, is a remarkable organisation but you do have a remarkable footprint at a local level. That's where a lot of work is done, and I know in my home town, Ballarat Legacy does a fantastic job.

I am really impressed with what Sydney Legacy is doing in relation to contemporary veterans and I will have more to say about that later on.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a statement of fact that our veteran community and the face of our veteran community is changing, and changing forever. This is our great challenge.

But this is not just a challenge for government, it is indeed a challenge for Legacy. It is indeed a challenge for the RSL, and it is indeed a challenge for ex-service organisations throughout the country.

I need to say to you, because there has been some press commentary about a number of things, that the veterans' affairs budget this year is around \$12.3b which is the same as the annual debt level of the former government.

But we have done a number of things, including a commitment I made personally and publicly to a number of you in this room in relation to DFRB and DFRDB indexation, which I know has been a serious issue.

The restoration of \$1m in BEST funding. As you've heard me say before, BEST is the glue which holds the ex-service community together and we have returned that \$1m which was removed several years ago.

There is some commentary about some of the changes we have made in the portfolio area. We inherited a debt legacy that we couldn't in all conscience do nothing about.

There are, like me, many parents and grandparents in this room today. My grandson is eight months old and I couldn't in all conscience look at my eight month old grandchild and say "you have played no part in the making of this huge debt but I am

going to make sure you are responsible for repaying it.” As a father, and as a grandfather, I simply could not do that. We have not made these decisions to be popular, we’ve made decisions to ensure the stability of those services that we are providing at the moment.

We as a nation made an absolutely appalling mistake a number of decades ago. And a group of men and some women who were doing no more and no less than serving this nation at this nation’s request were treated absolutely appallingly by this nation upon their return.

I think it is the darkest stain in this country’s history how we treated those men returning from Vietnam. And Jennifer (Collins), and I, and Legacy and other ESOs are today still trying to put the pieces together.

It is completely and utterly untenable for this nation to do to the latest generation of service men and women what was done to those men and women. And remarkably – and I’m sure this will surprise you – there are more men and women who served this country overseas in the last 20 years than served in Vietnam, Korea, Malaya and Borneo conflicts. Some 72,500 men and women, many of them young, have served in the last 20 years and many of those in the last decade.

Now with that comes extraordinary responsibilities on this nation.

We’ve got a choice to make.

It’s not just my choice to make, it’s your choice.

It’s not just our choice, it’s our nation’s choice.

Do we stand back and repeat the mistakes of the past, or do we do something to ensure that we minimise the chances of these young men and women falling through the cracks. And just as importantly we owe it to their families to ensure that we do not do so.

Now, I have been the Minister for around 10 months and it became immediately obvious to me after speaking to people like Jennifer and speaking to others in the department that the key to addressing this issue is early intervention.

We have had some issues in the past that the department was aware of but I think the department and the Secretary and others were looking for a partner to do what they knew needed to be done and I hope they’ve found that in me.

One of the initial things we did was to address the claims processing time issue. It is just wrong that it is 160 days on average for claims to be processed. That is the very period of time when young men and women and their families, transitioning out, need us. And we are now moving to address that.

I’ll talk about some of the mental health issues in a second.

We can proudly say that we have, I think, the best repatriation system in the world. And that has been built upon by a succession of governments of both political persuasions.

There is in my view one missing link in what we do. And that is in part a bit of disconnect between Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs. I am very pleased to be able to tell you today that the two are coming together because when you have someone in the defence force transitioning out, they are still the same person.

Their name is still the same, their issues are the same, they look the same and we should indeed be ensuring that it is as seamless as possible and we are moving very much in that direction.

I was going to tell you about some of the mental health issues we've implemented. The realities of life are that the way we have communicated with each other, since we're old enough to start communicating, is a completely different world to that these young men and women are in. And our communication methods and theirs are completely different.

So my department is moving now to engage these men and women in the sort of medium that they understand.

And it is that social media medium. It's smart phones, it is social networking, it's Facebook, all those things. And I don't pretend to be an expert but this is how these young men and women communicate with each other and it is one way the department can communicate with them in the future.

And I am very hopeful that one of the spinoffs of that will be, if there's good engagement between the department and these men and women, that the spinoff will be that there will be engagement with the ex-service organisations and particularly Legacy and I hope that will be an outcome of where we finish.

One of my responsibilities is as the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of ANZAC – which is a role I of course take as a huge honour.

The end of 2018 is as important, but if the only thing we have done is to build memorials, re-build memorials, have community events, then I think we have failed.

And what I want to see at the end of 2018 is whether we have the next generation of young Australians doing what you and I are doing at the moment. They will be carrying the torch and that is the next generation of young Australians.

And I want them to come out of this period understanding the when, the where, and the why - the when we fought, the where we fought and as important, or even perhaps more important, the why we fought.

And when they hop on a school bus, or they walk home, or they go shopping, or they go out at night with relative freedom – that they realise in many instances that freedom has been paid for in blood. And they must understand that.

Those who have made that sacrifice are in that magnificent institution, the Australian War Memorial. Forever commemorating those that made the ultimate sacrifice.

And if our young men and women understand that, ladies and gentlemen, then our young men and women will take up the cudgel and carry that to ensure that we never, ever, ever, forget.

For me, that will be the mark of the success of the centenary period.

Can I thank Legacy groups from throughout the country who have been a very important part of the Anzac Centenary Local Grants Programme. Every federal member in Australia has \$125,000 to spend on commemorative programmes. And I've seen some fantastic proposals coming through my office and Legacy has been a part of a number of those.

I ask you please to join with me in ensuring that the legacy of the Centenary is as I indicated before. Because this is not just my responsibility, not just your responsibility, it is the nation's responsibility to those young men and women, children of my grandchild's age, and those who will come after that, to ensure that that is our legacy.

Can I just very quickly thank Legatee Colin for his sacrifice. It has been a marvellous period as your President and can you join me in thanking Colin. Can you join me please in welcoming Legatee Eric. And ladies and gentlemen would you all please stand while I propose a toast to Legacy.

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for affording me the great honour of joining you today.