



Media Transcript

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Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of ANZAC
Special Minister of State

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****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY****

REMARKS AT THE 2014 NEW SOUTH WALES RSL STATE CONGRESS

[Greetings omitted]

It is great honour to be here today and I just want you to know, that this nation has to ensure that those who have served are appropriately recognised and I think you know of my deep, personal commitment to not repeating the mistakes of the past and I will make specific reference to that during my contribution this morning.

I think you know that after the last four years that I'm also passionately committed to ensuring that the next generation of young Australians understands that sacrifice and they know the when, where and why – that is, when we fought, where we fought and why we fought. And I'll talk about that matter later on.

The Centenary of Anzac will mark a centenary of service, encompassing all wars, conflicts and peacekeeping operations in which Australians have been involved. This significant period of commemoration will, in my view be the most important in this nation's history and the Government is determined to ensure all Australians are able to participate.

The local commemorative grants program, which I acknowledge was started by the former government, gave another \$25 000 to each electorate. Can I thank you, the RSL sub-branches because all my colleagues on all sides of the political fence have told me that you have been pivotal in putting together the projects for those local commemorative grants. So can I please ask you to give yourselves a big round of applause. You've done a fantastic job.

There's has been a lot of discussion about the budget and I know you'll be debating some motions this afternoon about that. With your leave Don I'll perhaps say a little bit more about that than I would normally do. Ladies and gentlemen, I don't think there was any doubt in anyone's mind that we were required to take significant action - I think everyone acknowledges that.

I must stress that doing nothing was simply not an option. It is beyond doubt that if you do not control debt, then debt starts to control you. There are many countries around the world that have been controlled by debt, and I think you will agree that the ramifications of that must not be repeated in this country.

The Prime Minister has recognised that decisions taken in the Budget are necessary, not necessarily populist. The PM has made it clear that in the context of this budget the Coalition wants to do what is right for the country. The decisions the Government has taken are about the national interest and not just about self-interest

I just want to put the nation's debt into some context. There's been accumulated deficits of about 191 thousand million dollars over the last six years. Had we not done anything, there would have been further cumulative deficits of about another \$123 thousand million.

Now to put that into some context, the impact of that would have been a debt of about \$25 000 for every man, woman and child in this country.

I know in this room, there are lots of mothers, lots of fathers and lots of grandparents, probably some great-grandparents. And as a father and a grandfather, I'm not prepared to sit back and let my children and grandchildren inherit a debt legacy that they had no part in making but will later have the responsibility to repay if nothing is done.

We are currently borrowing \$1 billion a month, or \$12 billion a year. To put that in to context, the entire DVA Budget is a little over \$12 billion. That means, we are spending almost as much on interest repayments a year as we are on veterans. This is unsustainable.

I acknowledge that there are some issues in relation to indexation that you are concerned about. I just want to make it clear that pensions will not be cut. We said we'd not cut pensions, and no pensions will be cut. We will honour that commitment in relation to pensions, the amount of the pension will continue to increase twice a year as it always has. In fact the pension increase that was paid in March of this year was based on CPI because inflation was higher than the growth in wages. The budget is about ensuring that we can sustain the level of support not only to the Veteran community but to the wider community.

Quite frankly, what is at stake is the sustainability of social security system if nothing was done. Now the DVA budget this year will be over \$12 billion. That was forecast in last year's budget and that will be delivered.

That's \$6.5 billion for pensions and \$5.4 billion for health services and given it's a public document, I'm sure John won't mind me reading that his Budget overview said that "Contrary to expectations, the DVA budget for 2014-15 has held the previously planned figure of \$12.3 billion. Thus for the most part Veteran and Descendent entitlements remain unaffected. This is most pleasing given the Commonwealth's Financial outlook."

Now I just also want to say that budgetary measures have been implemented across the board. High income earners as you know will be paying a debt levy, politicians have had their wages frozen for twelve months and things like the politician's gold pass have gone.

Consistent with our promise prior to the election, the Government is honouring the unique nature of military service, which everyone in this room has heard me talk about for the last four years.

Therefore, DVA Gold and White card holders will be exempt from the proposed \$7 GP co-payment announced in the Budget for DVA funded treatment. DVA White card holders will only pay a co-payment for those services they access under Medicare arrangements, for conditions not covered by their DVA White card.

The current pharmaceutical reimbursement arrangements for those who are accessing it will not change.

Now at Rooty Hill and here, I stood up, looked you in the eye and I made you a commitment in relation to DFRDB/DFRB indexation. I said 'we will do something about it'. There was a degree of cynicism in the room and not just here, but Victoria, Queensland and around the country and I acknowledge that. I said 'judge me on my actions and not my words.'

This commitment has been delivered – in full, on time and on budget.

And these arrangements will be kept as they are after 2017 when changes come into effect for other government payments. They will remain in place after September 2017 as they are at the moment. I must reiterate that the legislation that went through Parliament in March had been previously knocked back in the Senate by the Labor Party and the Greens and others. I am pleased that those parties finally relented and the legislation passed.

Now, I know you will make your own views in relation to the Budget and you will no doubt let me know what they are. Which I fully understand. But what I ask you please is to look at this in a wider context and not just about how it impacts on us individually.

As I said before, to do nothing was simply not an option. However I have said to you over the last few years that there were a number of matters that were extremely important to me in a personal sense. Slashing of the BEST funding, nearly two and a half years ago I talked about at this conference. I've said to you that I'm someone who has not served, I've never pretended to have served however I do understand that BEST funding has been the glue that holds the ex-service community together and we promised to put a million dollars back into BEST funding and that has been delivered.

I went to the ESO Round Table and said, I'm not the one delivering this, you are the ones delivering it, you tell me how you want that extra \$1 million spent. As Minister I am not delivering those services you are. I said to ESO's to come back to me with the way they wanted a million dollars spent.

There were some discussions that led to a slight delay in the opening of the applications which I am sure you can understand.

We will be expanding access to the VVCS, an extremely important service for ex-service members and their families. This is an important focus for me and I will acknowledge that this was commenced under the former government

I've already discussed the Centenary Local Grants Program which is going to enable all Australians to engage in the Centenary of ANZAC and the reason why we need Australians engaging in the centenary of ANZAC I'll talk about a bit later on. There is another matter that I've raised briefly with you in the past but I do want to expand on, and that is the mental health issue.

Since 1999 there have been some 72 000 ADF members who have served overseas. 72 000. That is more than served in Vietnam, Korea, Malaya and Borneo. So what obligations does that bring with it for me and for you? For the wider community?

In my view the obligation it brings is not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Now there are many, many people in this room who witnessed firsthand this nation's abrogation of its responsibility to you when you returned from those theatres. And that many in the room through personal experience know what the ramifications of that have been. Our approach to ensure we don't repeat those mistakes of the past is, as you'll appreciate, multifaceted.

I strongly and firmly believe that early intervention is the key. This comes in a variety of ways which involve appropriate access to services and it being early. It is about the issue of claims processing time. The Secretary who is here today is acutely aware of this - it was the first thing I raised with him after I was sworn in.

The current claims processing times are unacceptable. They are unacceptable. But there is no a dispute about that from either myself or the Department in relation to that. The Department moved very quickly to address some long outstanding claims and we moved quickly to address that. And there are some one thousand that were addressed. It was a special team that was put in place to address that. Now that had the immediate impact of delaying some of the newer

claims. However, in the last four months, about a thousand of those older cases, we have now seen an increase in the claims actually processed.

Earlier this year, I asked Vice Admiral Russ Crane to chair the Prime Ministerial Advisory Council with a focus on veteran mental health. It will be co-chaired by Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith VC MG, and it will have various department representatives and others. One which I am very pleased about is Ryan Stokes - the Stokes family have been extraordinarily generous towards the ex-service community. I'm pleased that Ryan has come on board.

One very significant decision we have to make however is how we are going to engage with those contemporary veterans.

For contemporary veterans in particular, social media is an important method of communicating what DVA services are available. I hope that will change the relationship between the contemporary veterans and the department - the spin off for that will be that they will get involved in ESO's and particularly the RSL. The RSL needs these contemporary Veterans' because the RSL is the peak representative body in this country and can do so without fear or favour and you need those younger, contemporary Veterans' to carry on.

With that in mind, I am very pleased at this New South Wales Congress to launch today a new mobile version of the highly-regarded *At Ease* mental health online portal.

With evidence emerging that younger veterans are accessing mental health information online via mobile devices, the *At Ease* portal has been developed to give users easier access to mental health information and support on their smart phones.

The *At Ease* website helps veterans and their families to recognise the signs of poor mental health, access self-help advice and tools, learn when and where to find professional support and learn from the stories of other veterans

With more than 50 per cent of visitors accessing the *At Ease* portal via a mobile device, DVA identified the need to provide a mobile version to deliver quick information to people on the go.

I am pleased to report that DVA is adapting its programmes to better meet the needs of contemporary veterans. Getting in early, not doing to them what was done to you. The aim is to help contemporary veterans to manage mental health concerns and, by encouraging them to seek help and treatment early, to support recovery.

DVA recently conducted a social media campaign using Facebook to focus attention on veteran mental health. These Facebook received more than one million views, with over 13,000 clicking through to the *At Ease* website.

What a lot of the younger men and women have said to me is that when the time comes for them to leave the Defence Force, they want to transition into a job. That for them and their families is the ultimate goal, because they know full well that for their family and for them that's where they need to be as much as humanly and physically possible.

I think it's been, quite frankly, a very large hole in what we have been doing as a nation and as a department in relation to those job opportunities. I've asked the Department to start to look at how we can have innovative ways of getting young men and women back into employment on transition and I'll have more to say about that during the year.

Ladies and gentleman in closing, on Anzac Day this year, I had the extraordinary honour of representing our nation at Gallipoli. I had the great honour of speaking at both the Dawn Service and at Lone Pine - a very special time for me, in a personal sense.

The Centenary of Anzac is not going to be just about the next four years. It is not just going to be about the memorials that we build or refurbish, as important as they are. It is not just going to be about the community events that we have funded through the local community grants program, or through other DVA funded programs.

The real test of this period is whether, at the end of 2018, you and I have instilled in a new generation an understanding that the legacy is theirs. That it will be up to them to carry it into the future. That when you and I are no longer doing this, there is a generation of young men and women who understand what their obligations are. And they can only understand those obligations when they understand the when, where, why - the when we fought, the where we fought and just as importantly the why we fought. We need that next generation to understand that the freedoms they enjoy today, the freedoms that you and I enjoy today, came at the price of blood.

If we don't come out of 2018 with the youth of today having an comprehensive understanding that the freedoms they enjoy today were paid for in blood by others, then we have failed.

You have heard me talk about him before but I will mention Con Sciacca, the former Labor Veterans' Affairs Minister who was responsible for the Australia Remembers campaign. We all want to leave politics with a legacy. Con Sciacca left politics with a legacy that he reengaged a new generation of young Australians in 1995 and they are indeed the young men and women who are at the Dawn Services today with their young children and teenagers by their side. 2014 to 2018 means that you and I have another opportunity to teach another generation of young Australians' what their obligations are. And if we do not do so ladies and gentlemen, then we have failed them and we have failed ourselves.

It is always a great honour for me to be at this Congress. I know we will have our differences. I hope that you know and accept that I am deeply committed to not repeating those mistakes of the past and an absolutely fundamental partner of this is the RSL. You are a remarkable organisation who has made a remarkable contribution. Can I conclude by thanking you for the great honour to open your conference and to be invited back again. I welcome the engagement with the NSW RSL which I have had both in opposition and in government.

Can I thank you for your contribution. Can I thank you for the work that you do for your colleagues around the nation. And again, collectively thank you very much for inviting me here today.