

## VETERANS AND FAMILIES STRATEGY

### *Motion*

**HON PIERRE YANG (South Metropolitan)** [11.29 am] — without notice: I move —

That this house notes the McGowan government's veterans and families strategy and encourages the state government to continue its strong support for Western Australian veterans and their families.

I had the honour of attending the launch of the veterans and families strategy by the Minister for Veterans Issues, Hon Peter Tinley, AM, MLA, yesterday morning. As we know, Minister Tinley served in the Australian Defence Force for 25 years, and of those 25 years, he spent 17 years in the Special Air Service Regiment. He served in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a veteran and Minister for Veterans Issues, Minister Tinley has been working tirelessly to advance policies that support our veterans and their families. The launch of the veterans and families strategy is the latest example of the McGowan government's and Minister Tinley's leadership in this space. Moving forward, policies and programs will be developed and implemented by the government in line with the strategy to better support our veterans and their families. I also wish to note at this point the bipartisan approach on this issue, and I want to give a shout-out to the shadow Minister for Veterans Issues, Hon Tjorn Sibma, for the work of the government and the opposition in this area. It is very important that we take a bipartisan approach, and I thank the member for his contribution.

The "Veterans and Families Strategy" report identifies a number of challenges. For example, we do not have accurate data on the number of veterans in Western Australia. It is estimated by the federal Department of Veterans' Affairs that there are about 320 000 veterans in Australia. The population of Western Australia is roughly 10 per cent of the population of Australia, so we could be looking at 30 000 veterans in WA. We do know that there are about 11 800 federal Department of Veterans' Affairs gold card holders in WA and about 6 250 DVA white card holders. It means that potentially over 10 000 ex-service men and women either are not eligible for a gold or white card or do not know they are eligible for one. I remember that I made a member's statement a few months ago calling on the community and members of this place to ask anyone who had served in the ADF to double-check whether they are eligible for a DVA gold or white card. I think the likelihood of someone not being aware of their eligibility for a gold card is very slim, but I remember that in my member's statement I said that the automatic issue of the white card only came in on 1 July 2018, so many veterans who would otherwise be eligible for a DVA white card may not know if they left the ADF prior to 1 July last year.

In his welcome message at the launch of the veterans and families strategy, Minister Tinley said that our service men and women are amongst the best in the world. They are highly trained and experienced professionals who have committed to serving something bigger than themselves. I agree with that statement wholeheartedly. I had the pleasure of serving with many of them during my 10 years in the ADF. After World War I, Australia welcomed home our returned soldiers and they were regarded as our first wave of veterans. A century later, with the many overseas engagements and deployments that we have had since the late 1990s, ranging from peacekeeping missions in East Timor to full-scale military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, we now have our fourth wave of veterans, who are much younger, and they are returning to our community. When our service men and women return from their service for our nation, which was done with distinction, we have a duty as a government and a community to do all we can to support them. Members of the ADF possess some strong qualities such as discipline, dedication, adaptability, flexibility and initiative. These qualities would benefit any business or profession, and I would have thought that any business, any prospective employer, seeing a job application from a veteran would employ them right away, but that is not the case. It is not uncommon for an ex-service man or woman to spend months searching for a job after they leave the ADF. As I said in August 2018 in one of my speeches on the issue of veteran homelessness and unemployment, the veteran unemployment rate is about 30 per cent and the underemployment rate is about 19 per cent. As a community, we can certainly do better than that.

The veterans and families strategy seeks to provide a framework by which we can better support our veterans and their families, to harness their skills, knowledge and sense of public service. It looks at five things: recognition, understanding, support, participation and commemoration. First of all, it is very important to recognise the service provided by our servicemen and servicewomen and the sacrifice that their families made to support that service. The strategy rightfully points out the service provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander veterans to our nation's security and safety, right from World War I to today. I also note the service provided by members of the ADF from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. As an officer cadet, I attended many Army courses and I was pleasantly surprised by the number of cadets from a CALD background participating and making a contribution to our nation. The strategy also outlines the need to support the Veterans Advisory Council to give veterans a voice on this important issue. The former minister, Hon Joe Francis, was instrumental in establishing that advisory council. I note that he is a veteran. He served in the Navy as a submariner, and whilst he was a minister of the Crown and a member of Parliament, he continued to serve in the Navy Reserve and continued to make a contribution to the Navy and the nation's defence.

The second thing that the strategy identifies is the lack of clear information and data about the veterans community. It is important that we further develop the profile of the veterans community in Western Australia so we can better provide assistance in areas that we need to. The third thing that the strategy identifies is supporting our veterans and their families. Military service is unique in many ways, and there are number of significant risks for members of the military. It is important that we look at ways to assist them, because although the federal Department of Veterans' Affairs is the first point of call for assistance for many veterans, when it comes to medical, mental health and housing issues, they turn to the state government. Therefore, we have a duty as a state to provide further assistance to veterans where the responsibilities of the DVA stop. For example, I recently heard from a veteran, a member of the Gosnells Returned and Services League, who used to volunteer at the RSL headquarters in the city. He lived in Byford and would spend \$12 on public transport to go to the city to volunteer, and this is not a unique situation. Many RSL volunteers would be out of pocket. I did some further research. In Queensland, Department of Veterans' Affairs gold card holders have been receiving a 50 per cent discount for public transport for many years. In February 2018, the Liberal government in Queensland gave DVA white card holders a 50 per cent discount. It is a very interesting idea and a measure of considerable merit, which I have raised with the Minister for Veterans Issues.

The fourth theme of the strategy involves participation. Veterans will inevitably leave the Australian Defence Force at some stage and return to civvy street—that is what we used to call it in the military. The government should encourage full participation by ex-members of the ADF. We should capitalise on their unique set of skills and knowledge to help support our defence industries. There are contacts within the military. We should not only encourage them to participate in the community, but also harness their special skills. I mentioned earlier that it is important that we promote the benefits of employing veterans. We should support our veterans by promoting their employment in the public and private sectors and in government agencies.

The last theme of the strategy is about commemoration. Australia was born in 1901 when the Australian colonies formed the Commonwealth of Australia. But the Australian identity was firmly forged after World War I; some say that that was Australia's coming of age. It is important that we remember the sacrifice and the service rendered by service men and women of many generations ago and of this generation. Over the past 15 or so years, there has been a growing sense of appreciation from the general public about the services provided by our service men and women. It is a great thing to see, but there is always room for improvement. As correctly identified by the strategy, the veterans issues portfolio will seek to continue to engage with stakeholders and ex-service organisations in this space so that we continue to ensure we always remember the services provided by our ex-service men and women.

In my remaining 50 seconds, I want to say that would it not be great if our history books in primary and secondary schools highlighted the services provided by our service men and women in the Boer War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Malayan emergency, the Vietnam War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as a peacekeeping nation in Rwanda and East Timor? Would it not be great to ensure that our next and future generations always remember the sacrifices of our service men and women? The state government has a responsibility, indeed a duty, to recognise that and I commend the motion to the house.

**HON DR SALLY TALBOT (South West) [11.44 am]:** I want to make a brief contribution to the debate on this motion and congratulate Hon Pierre Yang for bringing this matter to the house. Hon Pierre Yang does a fantastic job at our party forums of constantly making sure that we honour our responsibility to acknowledge the contribution to Australian society played by people who serve in the Australian Defence Force and also their families, friends and dependants. We know now how poorly we have responded in the past to the challenge of caring for people who have done so much to contribute to their community. I want to say a couple of very quick things.

Firstly, having worked for many years in politics in the Rockingham area, I have had a lot to do with service families in that area, particularly after the federal Labor government made the move to bring half the Royal Australian Navy into Western Australia a couple of decades ago. From working with Defence Force families in that region I came to understand what it is like to be partnered with somebody in the Defence Force and to raise a family in that context. I particularly remember the challenges posed by the failure of Australia to have a uniform education system and the effect that had on the children of Defence Force personnel who are constantly moving around Australia and having to readjust their academic expectations to the jurisdiction in which they are living at the time. That seemed to be something that we are not very conscious of as non-Defence Force people. It is a unique challenge for service families and we have a long way to go towards addressing that problem. For me, that was a taste of how different life is when one is part of a Defence Force family and the challenges that devolve to the rest of the community to satisfy those demands in some way.

This is a very fitting moment for the honourable member to raise this motion because this week we have seen the release of two very significant documents. Hon Pierre Yang referred to the first one, the "Veterans and Families Strategy", which was launched only this week. The other paper to which I want to draw the attention of members is titled, "Western Australian Defence and Defence Industries Strategic Plan". This is a way of joining up government. I am very proud to be part of the McGowan Labor government that is bringing this together. What

a simple proposition it is to look to retired Defence Force personnel to provide some of the skills that we need in our Defence Force industries. It is a really practical and very effective way of joining that circle to not only make the best of people's skills, but also put those skills towards the very important thing of improving industrial production in Western Australia. The recent decline in manufacturing is a challenge to which everybody in Australia has to rise. Defence industries give us an immediate opportunity to expand our capacity and, in doing so, not only use some of those skills that already exist within the Defence Force, but also improve employment opportunities within Western Australia, to which the McGowan Labor government is showing a completely practical and effective commitment.

I do not want to say much more because I know that many people around the chamber want to speak on this. I will finish by paying tribute to Defence Force personnel by reading out a quote. I would not normally be moved to quote, but when I was talking about speaking on this debate, my son drew my attention to this short statement on the monument erected in memory of former United States Army General Creighton Abrams. These are very fitting words that give us an idea about the spirit in which we should consider these matters —

“There must be, within our Army, a sense of purpose and a dedication to that purpose. There must be a willingness to march a little farther, to carry a heavier load, to step out into the darkness and the unknown for the safety and well-being of others.”

That is what our Defence Force offers to us, and in return we should offer particular support.

**HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan)** [11.50 am]: I commend Hon Pierre Yang for bringing a thoughtful motion to this house. I endorse the terms in which he has presented this motion. I do not think that Hon Pierre Yang is engaging in any self-congratulation of the McGowan government. He compels it to work harder in this direction, and that is to the member's credit. I also appreciate Hon Peter Tinley's invitation to attend the launch of this strategy yesterday. Unfortunately, I was unable to get there, but his office very helpfully and thoughtfully provided me with a copy of that strategy some days before, so I am in a position to speak meaningfully to it. I acknowledge this piece of work as not only a necessary first step to come to grips with a challenge, but also an opportunity to support the transition of veterans from military service into civilian life in Western Australia. I also recognise that veterans bring with them a unique and dynamic family situation. People are able to render the service they do to this country because they have a family behind them who suffers and sacrifices to a greater or lesser degree along with them.

I want to make some passing remarks on the strategy as it has been presented. I think the essence of all strategies is in execution and application. It is sometimes very easy to put together worthy sounding documents. The application of the sentiments and the achievement of those targets is the appropriate measure of whether that strategy was well formulated. I make that remark because the responsibility for this portfolio was housed within the monolithic agency of the Department of Communities. To the best of my understanding, until this point, only one dedicated officer out of 500 people in that department is focused on veterans issues. That is quite a significant burden and I seek the government's attention towards remedying that and reallocating those resources internally to ensure that the very worthy aims that the government has set for itself in the strategy have some reasonable prospect of being realised.

As Hon Pierre Yang has noted, this strategy comprises five themes—commemoration, recognition, understanding, support and participation. In what remains of my time available, I will concentrate on the participation angle. If there is one thing that we can get right as a community, as a state and as a country, it is to make as seamless as possible the transition from service life into civilian life by providing avenues for gainful employment. We can do this in a way that, effectively, is not the provision of charity. I have mentioned a number of times in this chamber and outside this Parliament that there exists an exceptionally strong business case for business in the private sector to employ veterans. They are well-trained, well-motivated and highly capable people driven by a desire or an ethos to serve something beyond themselves. Teamwork is inherent in everything they do.

There are a couple of impediments, structurally and culturally, to making that transition to employment as seamless and as painless an exercise as it can be. A lot of this issue resides within the nature of pre-separation briefings from the Australian Defence Force, which has changed over time. We can improve the process by identifying in a structured way how qualifications in military service, whether it is as a diesel mechanic, an IT specialist, a stores person or whatever, correspond to civilian education or vocational training equivalents in the outside world. There is a disconnect in the minds of employers and recruitment agencies about how to place people and how skills, qualifications and experience generated over 20 or more years of military experience resonate and correspond with labour force needs and the specific requirements of employers. We can perhaps be a little smarter in addressing that issue. In recent years, allied nations of ours, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have dedicated some efforts to remedy that.

There is, unfortunately, a very pernicious cultural mindset towards veterans. The minister speaks of a narrative that I concur with—that is, the narrative of the broken digger. The expectation that every ex-serviceperson is in some way damaged psychologically, and that that psychological damage is at the extreme end of the scale. The belief that

all they represent to a potential employer is an ongoing liability is a noxious, completely uninformed stigmatisation and is very damaging to the individuals concerned. A number of veterans with whom I served are close longstanding friends of mine. I was a civilian in the defence department for a number of years, but I served in operational areas on reasonably lengthy deployments. When I was provided with this portfolio, they came to me and said, “Whatever you do, do not overemphasise mental health. Do not overemphasise PTSD.” I said, “Why? These are legitimate things to raise.” The response almost uniformly from a younger cohort—I think Hon Pierre Yang and the minister referred to them as the fourth wave, who over the last 20 years have cycled through the Middle East and other deployments—is that when they see employers and try to get on with our lives, they assume we have post-traumatic stress disorder. They do not want to touch them. They said that the more we speak about this, the more we confirm in these people’s minds that we have this ongoing problem.

I do not think there is an easy way to challenge that notion. We need to be very sensitive. We need to deal with the mental health requirements of service people in a constructive manner. We should not overlook that challenge. There has been a Senate inquiry in recent years into dreadful suicides and the suicidal ideation of ex-servicemen. I commend that Senate report to every member here. It makes for very sober reading. I am cautious in my public remarks about getting that balance right. I think a strategy such as this as presented by the government goes some way to getting that conversation right but it is a difficult balance to strike.

I want to make one passing remark on the commemoration and recognition elements of this strategy. As a society, we do well with commemoration on two days a year—Anzac Day and Remembrance Day—and then largely forget about it the rest of the time. I think that is sad, but to some degree inevitable. I am encouraged by the fact that we mark those signal moments in this country’s cultural and military history. For some time, I have been working with a group of Korean veterans and Australian veterans of the Korean conflict. I was greatly encouraged by the minister’s commitment, about a month ago, to work towards an establishment of a standalone memorial to that Korean conflict, hopefully, within the broader grounds of Kings Park and Botanic Garden. It is a historical oversight that has been remedied in other states and I am more than prepared to work with this government to give that conflict and its veterans the due recognition that they deserve.

**HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan)** [11.59 am]: I rise to indicate my support for this motion. I thank Hon Pierre Yang for bringing such a thoughtful motion to the attention of this chamber. It is very helpful for us to discuss these issues. As has already been said, the Minister for Veterans Issues, Hon Peter Tinley, launched the veterans and families strategy on 4 September. The strategy has five themes: recognition and support, participation, understanding, commemoration, and education. It is designed to guide the development and implementation of policies and initiatives to promote the wellbeing of WA’s veterans. I note that the strategy also places importance on finding ways for the WA economy to benefit from the veteran community. Hon Dr Sally Talbot talked about some of the ways that can occur. I really welcome the development of this strategy. I recognise that the federal government has primary responsibility for providing programs for veterans, but it is really important that this state also takes a strategic approach to ensure that we augment the support for veterans here in Western Australia.

The number of veterans is unknown, but the federal Department of Veterans’ Affairs recently estimated that there are around 640 000 living veterans, which includes reservists, in Australia. We are talking about significant numbers of people. The Productivity Commission recently brought out a report entitled “A Better Way to Support Veterans”. That report makes a very clear case for why we need to support veterans better. It found that the current system is failing to focus on the lifetime wellbeing of veterans; it is overly complex; it is difficult to navigate; it is inequitable; and, unfortunately, it is also poorly administered. The all-encompassing nature of the Defence Force, as we know, requires veterans to completely redefine their identity and their place in the world when they leave the forces. For some people, it can be very hard to transition out of the Defence Force and into the community because the culture of the civilian employment sector is very different, and veterans can struggle to work out how their skills may translate.

But, members, what skills these people can end up acquiring! I look at my daughter, whom I have spoken about before, who is an Army reservist. She is also a full-time student but has been in the Army Reserve for a number of years. I really envy the sort of skills that she has accumulated. She knows everything from being able to change a truck tyre to being able to drive trucks at night. She said to me, “Mum, I learnt how to bayonet a man and patch a bullet wound in the same day.” She can fire guns and all these sorts of things. She has assured me that come the zombie apocalypse, she is well placed to protect me and the rest of the family. Apart from those quite extraordinary skills, she has also learnt the importance of leadership and teamwork. She quite enjoys it and feels like she gets an awful lot out of it, plus she is as fit as anything. We cannot underestimate the importance of the sorts of skills that people are able to benefit from in these environments.

Last year, we spoke to a motion on veterans and homelessness. We found that the situation is dire, with as many as one in 20 homeless people in WA being veterans. It is important that although we recognise that stigma around mental health within the veterans community can be a huge barrier to veterans being fully supported within the community,

we cannot afford to gloss over those people who have ongoing mental health issues because the impacts can be profound. It is important that we refer to the statistics around this—the actual figures that show nearly half the veterans who leave the ADF will experience a mental disorder within five years. The most common problem is anxiety, then post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks and depression. I also remind members that one in two people—that is, at least half the people in this chamber—will experience mental health issues at any given point in their life; and, indeed, one in five of us will experience and live with mental health issues at any given point.

Therefore, I remind members that although there are specific risks for veterans, we have a broader issue of mental health within this community, and, therefore, we have an obligation to address issues of stigma around mental health. We also know that veterans are four times more likely to have an alcohol disorder compared with personnel who are still serving. As has already been said, veterans are more likely to take their own lives. We know that ex-servicemen aged 18 to 24 are at a particular risk, and they are two times more likely to die from suicide than Australian men who have not served and are of the same age. More Australian veterans have lost their lives by suicide than have been killed on active duty since the Vietnam War. I have also spoken in this place about the fact that my uncle was one of those people, so it is an issue that has deeply affected my family. Around 5 000 people leave the defence forces each year, but only one in 10 are seeking help from Veterans Affairs. We know that we have a huge unmet need and we know that we need to ensure that our services are appropriately tailored.

Going back to the report, I note that the section that refers to support recognises that service exposes people to a range of risk factors and can result in unique health and support needs during and after their service. It also states —

State Government agencies are frequently the first point of contact for veterans accessing medical, mental health or housing services. The State Government has a role in ensuring the services it provides, including those funded by the ... (DVA), meet the needs of veterans and their families.

This is a really pertinent point. Mental health issues, alcohol and other drug problems and a range of other areas of support are required right across the community, but we need to make sure that that support is appropriate, tailored and proactive as well as responsive to people who are seeking support.

I have to acknowledge that the mental health of veterans families is also very much impacted when a veteran is struggling. We have to ensure that our support services can recognise and accommodate for this. Previously, we have worked closely with the veterans' families groups, who have talked about the need to ensure that spouses and children, in particular, can get specific support so they know what they can best do for the veteran as well as meet their own needs. It is vitally important that veterans can access the support they need when they need it, including mental health and health services, alcohol and drug services and tenancy support. It is fantastic that we, at least, have a framework to try to talk about how we can make sure that these services are appropriately accessed and will hopefully be co-produced with the veterans themselves, because they are best placed to say how it needs to happen. Hopefully, we can turn around some of the negative perceptions perpetuated around veterans, because, clearly, they have a range of skills that we should be capitalising on and that can be enormously advantageous. Let us see whether we can get it right. We need our veterans, and we need our defence forces, so let us make sure that those people who are doing this work are supported and valued as best we can. I welcome the fact that the state government has taken a keen interest in this issue.

**HON ALANNAH MacTIERNAN (North Metropolitan — Minister for Regional Development)** [12.08 pm]: I rise to provide the government's response. First of all, I would really like to thank Hon Pierre Yang for moving this motion and giving the house the opportunity to talk about the very important "Veterans and Families Strategy" report that was released by the Minister for Veterans Issues, Peter Tinley, yesterday. I want to acknowledge Hon Pierre Yang, recognising the time he served as an officer with the Australian Army Reserve and that he has a profound commitment to defence personnel and veterans in Western Australia. I understand from a number of his peers, whom I have met, that Hon Pierre Yang was considered to be a very fine officer and one who was deeply respected and trusted by his peers. He brings those same qualities into Parliament. This strategy, as members have said, is very important. The McGowan government has a very strong commitment to veterans. In our cabinet, the Premier, Minister Peter Tinley and Minister Paul Papalia have all served full-time in the armed services, and a number of members have served in the Army Reserve. I want to recognise the bipartisan approach that has been taken. I know Minister Tinley has reached out to Hon Tjorn Sibma, and we very much appreciate the spirit in which Hon Tjorn Sibma has embraced that involvement; that is strong progress.

Hon Tjorn Sibma talked about implementation. We can point to a number of things we have done already. The government has expanded the Veterans Advisory Council, and an important part of that is increasing the representation of female veterans and bringing other ranks into what was a heavily officer-dominant council. We have increased from \$300 000 to \$500 000 the funding available to the Anzac Day trust fund, which is the discretionary funding that is available to help ex-service organisations. We have also, for the first time in this state, appointed a full-time officer for veterans' affairs issues. We recognise that we have some way to go to catch up with other states in that regard, but we think it is a very positive start, and that full-time officer has been working very effectively in developing this strategy.

As Hon Dr Sally Talbot said, we really want to weave this strategy into a larger concept of defence industry skills and using the resources of ex-personnel to help us develop industry in this state. I think people often underestimate just how many advanced manufacturing companies we have in Western Australia that are involved in the defence industries. It is the government's intention to build on that, and we see veterans playing a really important part in helping us develop that new industrial base.

I thank all members for their contributions. This is an area in which we can move forward in a very tripartisan way to make progress for our veterans.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.