



DEFENCE FORCE WELFARE ASSOCIATION

Patron-in-Chief: His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)

A Member of the Alliance of Defence Service Organisations

ADVOCACY IN A VORTEX

Today, the number and purpose of the nation's ex-service organisations (ESOs) is a vortex of confusion and questionable benefit to the broad Australian Defence Community (ADC).

Research has identified approximately 5,3000 Australian charities that have 'veteran' in their charter or statement of purpose. Many of these organisations are non-veteran related and include, Beyondblue, church groups and others that still identify as being in the veteran space. More specifically the same research has identified over 2,000 organisations that are unambiguously veteran specific i.e. ESOs. These include traditional ESOs established after the world wars through to those established in the post-Vietnam period and more recent ones we now know as 'virtual' or 'micro' ESOs. This latter group generally operate over the net and many do not identify as ESOs.

Contrast this position with the period after the major wars of the last century when it was the RSL, the TPI Federation and the War Widows Guild that advocated to government on behalf of the ADC. Advocacy was a singular issue during a time when many politicians and bureaucrats had military experience. Such is no longer the case.

In 1927 when the Federal Parliament moved from Melbourne to the new national capital there was only three lobby groups there. These were the AMA, business and the RSL. Today there are over 200 registered lobby businesses or organisations and over 600 registered lobbyists. These are professional organisations that lobby or advocate for local or international business, major not-for-profit organisations such as Life Line and peak bodies such as the Automobile Association of Australia. It is a competitive environment that demands professional expertise that ESOs individually and collectively do not have.

Recently the Minister for Veterans Affairs called on the veteran community to 'speak with one voice' - an aspirational call that demands much of the ESO community at a time when it is operating in a vortex of egos, single issue groups, traditional organisations that rebuff calls to work collaboratively with others, recent web based organisations and individuals that promote specific causes.

The vortex is made more turbulent by recent developments in Canberra where there are now two committees with the mission of developing an advocacy model of collaboration. One committee is developing a model that will impose a top down solution, with a peak body plus a 'professional' board. The other is developing under the auspices of the Alliance of Defence Organisations (ADSO) and pursues a bottom up model of cooperation that has been developing for some time.

Gone are the days when the veteran community had ready access to the prime minister and a government unfettered by the presence of powerful, professional lobby organisations with healthy bank accounts. If the ESOs are to be successful in advocacy, collaboration must be a reality and not merely an aspiration. Collaboration committees must walk the talk and not merely respond with platitudes. It is a time for good will and patience from all in the ESO community for the common good

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