

# What we do and what we need to do

## Continued from Page 1

progressive changes, both to our National Constitution and to our practices. We should expect that our office bearers and staff are engaged in continuous improvement.

In the light of recent changes and the outcomes of state branch reviews, the National Executive had decided that a more structured re-examination of our national arrangements would be appropriate. The paper *Call to Action RSL 2015* is a useful contribution to this process.

It makes several sound observations about the present circumstances we face and offers worthwhile and constructive views. However, some of its observations are debatable although they do represent perceptions which we must reasonably take account of.

Rather than do a critique of the paper, as it has not been widely circulated, I should like to make some observations on key themes relevant to the League with the benefit of my five years in this role. I do so because assumptions and assertions are often made from less advantageous positions. One only has to see some of the veteran web sites and email exchanges to realise that a few ill-informed and prejudiced individuals can create enormous misunderstanding — and often damage — in the veteran community.

## Relevance

The League must be relevant to:

- its members and potential members (including particularly those serving)
- the community; and
- the Government and other stakeholders.

Relevance to our present members is maintained only when members see value in their membership, are willing to contribute and proud to belong. All members, particularly office-bearers at all levels, have a role to play. Having seen a good number of sub-branches I have been hugely impressed with the dedication, the sense of belonging and camaraderie that exist and the many local achievements. I know also that some sub-branches are less active and perhaps personalities intrude on the their smooth operation.

It is the task of the state branches and the National Headquarters to offer guidance, support and encouragement to our widely dispersed sub-branch network and to look after their interests beyond the League but this must not only be done — as is largely the case now — but be seen to be done. Communication is the means and we still have work to do in this respect.

Our potential members need to be convinced of our value to them by being able to see what we do and be told what we are doing. Again, all of us carry some responsibility in our own geographic areas and through targeted communication.

Serving men and women are generally positively disposed towards the League, largely because of our extensive interaction with them through, for example:

- sending AFOF parcels twice yearly to forces serving overseas;
- increasing support for transition management for those leaving the service;
- commemorative activities;
- providing direct on-base support, well demonstrated, for example, by Townsville RSL with 3 Brigade;
- interaction at state and national levels with the Defence Reserves Support Council;
- giving advice to individuals on pension and compensation matters;
- public advocacy of defence capability and service conditions — again needing to be more widely publicised;
- awards recognising excellence, extending from ADF cadets to officer training establishments;

## Edited text of a statement by the National President of the RSL, Major-General Bill Crews (Rtd)

- engagement with Operation Care, providing some family recreation for those wounded on overseas operations;
- through direct engagement, influencing ADF mental-health policy and practice and encouraging DVA to promote its health programs in the Defence Force.
- supporting the Centre for Military and Veterans' Health and its work affecting serving men and women; for example, the Deployment Health Surveillance Studies.

## The RSL has made it abundantly clear that we are here to serve all serving and ex-service men and women.

Although such support and interaction is appreciated, it may not translate into membership because of the enormous demands placed on all serving men and women and their consequent inability to commit to joining the RSL or even other organisations attractive to them. Our hope is that many will at least consider joining as they leave the service.

The community continues to recognise the League as the major ex-service organisation and generally regards us favourably. In smaller country centres, the League's sub-branches are a vital element of the community and, in almost all sub-branches, there is a good deal of interaction beyond commemorative events — school and youth programs, our community awards, fund-raising and programs ...

Our national footprint is arguably greater than that of any other voluntary organisation. Nearly all our 1340 sub-branches are in Australia and nearly all communities claim a presence of members if not always a sub-branch.

Although the Government must acknowledge and deal with an increasing number of ex-service organisations, the RSL has retained its pre-eminence with both major political parties. We enjoy excellent relationships and access, our measured and considered proposals are given careful attention and we are consulted on all major issues. Our policy development, through the at-times-laborious congress process, is actually seen as a strength when our submissions are made.

Both the previous prime minister and the present one engage actively with us and are prepared to attend our major gatherings. Our National Congress has been used as a platform for major policy announcements.

Several other government agencies engage with us on key issues such as heritage, citizenship, immigration and health and ageing, while we have effective collaborative arrangements with organisations such as Drug Free Australia, Arthritis Australia and the Macular Degeneration Foundation.

It is unfortunate that many of our collaborative relationships and the extent of our interaction with a range of community organisations and issues is not more widely understood.

Perhaps there is scope to improve our reporting on such matters for those interested, beyond our web pages and state-based publications.

## Membership

The number of service members is declining slowly. That is to be expected — the number of people in uniform or who

have served is declining as the World War II veterans pass on.

Traditionally, the RSL has had between 25 and 33 per cent of the total number of people eligible for membership. We would wish that to be higher and it can be but we should also be realistic. Some people will not wish to join us because they lead already busy lives. Some remain antagonistic to us for a number of largely historical reasons.

It is widely accepted that young people do not join organisations these days as earlier generations did. That makes the task of recruitment that much more difficult. However, we can retain those we have and those who do join by offering value in our membership and relevance to their needs and expectations.

Our engagement with the ADF has seen a steady increase in numbers of serving men and women joining. We have encouraged this by offering free membership for the first year. We are looking at a "Defence membership" administered by one state branch and not requiring membership of a specific sub-branch. Some ADF members prefer the flexibility this offers if they experience frequent postings.

Our National Membership Forum is exploring other practical ways of enhancing our value proposition with younger people in mind.

The League stands willing to accommodate other ESO or unit associations whose memberships have declined below viability.

## We remain the only ESO offering coverage for all who have served or are serving and remain also the largest organisation by far. That situation is unlikely to change but of course should never be taken for granted

The League:

- Recognises the right of any group of service or ex-service people to form their own organisations;
- does not engage in public criticism of other ESOs; and
- works constructively with all ESOs for the betterment of our collective membership.

The League is generally able to lend its support to such issues but only within the context of our over-all assessment of where the needs are greatest and for the most deserving ...

The League is often criticised for not working with other ESOs yet, strangely, we have also been criticised for working with the Defence Force Welfare Association on superannuation issues. All of the criticisms are unjustified and ill-informed. Our work with DFWA occurred because that association has strong expertise in superannuation, we enjoy a good level of mutual understanding and the RSL's National Conditions of Service Committee Chairman is also a DFWA Vice President ...

The League:

- works effectively with both sides of Parliament and the Department. We focus on building constructive relationships. Our proposals are soundly based, carefully considered, and presented unambiguously. Most of our proposals

have their origins in the sub-branches of the League.

The League's national structure facilitates our representational endeavours, providing for:

- links with most Members of Parliament; and
- effective working relationships with state governments

Our national committees focus on the full range of issues canvassed in our Statement of Objectives and from these committees is drawn our capacity to respond to parliamentary reviews and committees and informal dialogue with ministers.

## It is fair to acknowledge that we have not always kept our members as well-informed as they might expect on the progress of these representations

However, it has not been our approach to conduct our advocacy through the media or other more public means.

Contrary to recent assertions, most of the enhancements in repatriation arrangements can be attributed to the League's quiet but effective representation. Beyond requests for specific improvements to compensation or medical-support arrangements, the League has played a leading role in areas of aged care, mental health and understanding the needs of our present or recently serving men and women. These engagements yield positive if less tangible results but have a direct impact on nearly all veterans. The League focuses particularly on whole-of-life issues such as health management, home care and overcoming social isolation.

The perception that the League is too close to the Government (of either political persuasion) needs comment. A close working relationship and mutual understanding and confidence is how best to achieve results but within that framework there remains opportunity for frankness, disagreement and argument. However, it is not useful to make these matters of public theatre. Public concern is expressed from time to time when there is public commentary on specific issues but in all cases the Government will have already been made aware of those concerns and afforded an opportunity to respond.

## Pension and Welfare Support

Consistent with our forebears' objectives 93 years ago, the League provides what support it can to any veteran, serviceman or servicewoman seeking support with pension or compensation claims, access to other appropriate support, hospital or home visits for those confined because of illness and day clubs for those living alone.

However, the League is facing the same challenges as all other ESOs:

- ageing of our volunteers and a reluctance by others to step forward; and
- increased complexity of the legislation.

We are now engaged with DVA and other ESOs to explore more contemporary options for meeting the continuing demand for pension and welfare support. Again, the League has taken initiatives to explore alternatives, such as regional veteran centres, proposing accreditation of pension officers and advocates and seeking an appropriate balance between paid officers and volunteers.

We expect a good deal of progress in this area during 2009.