

Down the Slippery Slope We Go

(Dignity Denied)



THE government, on Repatriation Commission advice, has closed down another VAN Office, this time in Canberra, leaving its clients the humiliation of lining up at Centrelink.

This can only mean the government sees war veterans simply as welfare cases rather than those who have rendered the highest and most dangerous public service and deserving of special care.

The government is indicating to war veterans that they do not deserve the dignity of a 'stand-alone' Repatriation service.

Of course, DVA is putting a spin on the move, claiming we will be better off at the Centrelink office.

After all they say, the present Canberra VAN office is not really suitable, not well placed, not widely known, not adequately resourced.

The Centrelink office at Woden can overcome these inadequacies and is therefore a great advance for veterans.

They imply DVA are our wonderful benefactors.

But what DVA's spin really means is that they have allowed the existing 'badly placed' VAN office to stand despite its bad geographic location and allowed its resources to remain deficient for years.

Now they want to remedy their past neglect.

So why hasn't DVA identified a new better located separate office and resourced it satisfactorily, retaining that special care and allowing veterans to retain their dignity.

That would be consistent with successive government promises.

Instead DVA is condemning veterans to queue at the Centrelink office, reporting to the Centrelink reception counter before being directed to the veterans' section. No dignity there.

How dare DVA/Repatriation Commission claim to be doing us a favour by sending us to a Centrelink office.

This move is not about veterans' welfare, it is about meanness, about penny pinching, about ripping dignity away from disabled veterans.

The government *says* it will not amalgamate the Department of Veterans Affairs with Centrelink but it is, in fact, doing just that, gradually.

Here are just some of previous closures:

- Morwell VAN office has been co-located into Centrelink Morwell;
- Ballarat VAN office has been co-located into Centrelink Ballarat;
- Frankston, Gosford, Bairnsdale and Wollongong VAN offices were closed and veterans sent to Centrelink offices.
- Bendigo, Mildura and Warrnambool agency contracts were ended.
- Launceston VVCS closed.
- Newcastle VVCS staff cut.
- Other VVCS offices have been closed and veterans sent to civilian clinics.

How huge, then, is the gap between this government's public declaration that DVA is not in danger of amalgamation with Centrelink when it is actually happening.

How huge is the gap between the government's accolades for Australian war veterans and its real disinterest shown by the semi-hidden incremental demolition of its stand-alone carers?

The answer is that the gap is huge and widening.

In ripping away the dignity of sick and troubled veterans by sending them to Centrelink offices, the government, the Repatriation Commission and DVA are to be condemned. ■