



**AFTERMATH: AUSTRALIA
AFTER THE GREAT WAR**
ONE-DAY CONFERENCE SATURDAY 6 APRIL 2019
POMPEY ELLIOTT MEMORIAL HALL
403 CAMBERWELL ROAD, CAMBERWELL

KEYNOTE SPEAKER — MELEAH HAMPTON
AUTHOR OF *ATTACK ON THE SOMME: 1ST ANZAC CORPS AND THE
BATTLE OF POZIERES RIDGE 1916*



MILITARY HISTORY AND
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Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs



“AFTERMATH”: AUSTRALIA AFTER THE GREAT WAR



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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT
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The Repatriation Commission: Origins and Impacts

Mike O’Meara, OAM

The repatriation system is not fit-for-purpose — it requires fundamental reform ... it is not working in the interests of soldiers and their families or the Australian community.

The system is complex, difficult to navigate, inequitable, and poorly administered, which places unwarranted stress on claimants.

A single ministry for those serving and those who have served should be established. A new independent statutory agency should be created to administer and oversee the performance of the system.

Strong words! They come not from 1918 when the Repatriation Commission came into being, but from just over 100 years later, in 2018. Of course, with a little license, they are some of the observations in the draft report of the Productivity Commission Review of Compensation and Rehabilitation for Veterans that was released in December.

They are eerily reminiscent of sentiments expressed at the time Australia’s formal Repatriation system was being born. What that tells us about how far the system has or hasn’t come is a much larger conversation which is still unfolding, but we can perhaps illuminate the present-day discussion a little by looking at what the founders were trying to achieve in creating the Repatriation Commission, and how successful they were.

When you try to imagine what it must have felt like back then, there is the overwhelming sense that early on people were bursting out of their skins to do something, anything, to support the injured troops who were already starting to return home in 1914. So, in terms of the development of ‘repatriation’ as we came to understand it in Australia, the aftermath of war was tangible and pressing very early in the piece.

Governments soon recognised that spontaneous public fervour, although a critically important part of the war effort, wouldn’t be enough for what lay ahead. They didn’t know how long the war would last, but the clock was ticking and they were quick to realise that substantial and sustained provision would have to be made for the wounded, and for the families of the war dead.

In that charged environment there was never any doubt that Australia would do the right thing by our soldiers; but with the Commonwealth little more than fourteen years old, and state and federal governments, and various political alliances still trying each other on, here they were, landed with this massive looming challenge. Their biggest problem was that there were no roadmaps for them to follow. They were virtually starting from scratch.

It’s fascinating to look back now and observe them - with all that noise and uncertainty going on around them – as they tried to anticipate the scenarios that would be coming

their way, and to manage all the ‘what ifs’, all the contingencies they would have to deal with.

We need to be mindful that by the time most of us here came on the Repatriation scene, these issues had largely been settled. For the First World War folk, however, questions of what needed to be done, who would do it, and how it would be done, became a major preoccupation while the war itself was still going on.

So how did they respond? Generally speaking, it could be described as an evolutionary process where they more or less *organically edged their way forward*, learning as they went, marked by a number of discrete milestones along the way.

I would like to step briefly through that process to give some context for the early work of the Repatriation Commission.

The first of the milestones was the decision by government to address the question of compensation. Right from the outset, when they were raising the initial field force, AIF founding commander Sir William Bridges urged Defence Minister Millen to act on pensions and compensation for wounds and disability.

Millen agreed. He was determined that the experience of the Boer War veterans would not be repeated. They had received limited payments from various sources - including the British Government, the state governments, and patriotic funds. Millen was adamant that the new war pensions would be administered by the federal treasury.

In September 1914 the Fisher Labour Government won office, and new Defence Minister George Pearce introduced a War Pensions Bill, which adopted the majority of Millen’s proposals.

Most important was the introduction of the concepts of eligibility, entitlement and assessment based on medical opinion – in determining pensions. These crucial concepts would become well and truly familiar to later generations of ex-service people.

The inaugural pensions scheme did have its shortcomings. The basic benefits were so low that many people needed extra help from patriotic funds to achieve an adequate weekly income.

Nevertheless, it really is commendable that both Liberal and Labour governments moved so promptly to establish a basic framework for war pensions.

The next major development was the initiation of a structure to add focus. It was achieved through the formation of a Federal Parliamentary War Committee. This was an advisory body that could only examine issues referred to it by the Government, which were mainly recruitment matters and general issues facing returned soldiers. It had twelve members - six from each party, upper and lower house – and they had oversight of quite a network of state War Councils, state Medical Committees, and also War Service Committees of private citizens at the local government level.

As early as August 1915, the War Committee was already beginning to consider placing ex-servicemen in employment, examining the availability of land for farming and settlement, and infrastructure projects that might engage returned men.

In February 1916 the committee convened a conference of federal and state ministers in Melbourne. This conference was influential because it produced ground rules for soldier settlement and for re-establishing service people back in the community. In order to provide financial assistance to soldier settlers to tide them over until their farms became productive, the conference agreed that an Australian Soldiers’ Repatriation Fund should be established to raise cash and in-kind donations from business and communities around the country.

The fund had a Board of Trustees made up of prominent businessmen, appointees of the War Committee, and Prime Minister Billy Hughes was ex-officio chairman. They soon realised that the fund could be used to support other programs, especially rehabilitation and vocational training.

The national reach of the Fund served to promote the idea of a repatriation ethos among the wider public. For example, it helped to consolidate the term ‘repatriation’ in the vernacular - the administrative committee of the board of trustees was generally known as the Repatriation Executive, and references to Repatriation policies, Repatriation taxes and Repatriation schemes became increasingly common.

In spite of this promise, by late 1916 the Fund was failing. It hadn’t been actively promoted, and the fundraising effort was undermined by the domestic political turmoil and the conscription debate. Even though it was based on a network of local committees it was still poorly perceived at ground level, and was never differentiated sufficiently from the patriotic funds.

In the bigger evolutionary scheme of things, there was an upside to the failure of this experiment with voluntarism. It saw the balance shift inexorably to a Repatriation system funded and largely administered by the federal government.

The trend to greater Commonwealth control was reinforced by Prime Minister Hughes who began to play a more active personal role in war veterans’ matters around this time. In December 1916 he said:

“We have entered into a bargain with the soldier and we must keep it. We must settle him on the land or in some business or occupation . . . clearly a responsibility rests upon the Commonwealth for looking after returned soldiers . . . we are charged with the defence of the commonwealth; we pay his wages; we are to pay his pension; and we must look to his future.”

In January 1917, a Premiers’ conference was held in Melbourne. It would prove even more significant for the Repatriation story than the one held a year earlier. The Premiers agreed on guidelines for an extensive Repatriation scheme to be administered by a Commonwealth central authority.

And so, Senator Edward Davis Millen re-enters the stage.

He was the man PM Hughes turned to for the task of putting all of this in place. He would become the first Minister for Repatriation.

Millen was born in Kent in 1860 and came out to NSW as a 20 year-old. He worked as a journalist before going into politics in the NSW parliament. In 1901 he was elected senator in the new Commonwealth government. He was either leader of the government or opposition in the senate, continuously from 1907 to 1923.

Of course, many distinguished Australians had a hand in formulating and implementing repatriation here, but Edward Millen is generally regarded as having had the most profound influence.

He was a feisty free-thinker. He reckoned he had been given pretty free rein in his new role – federal cabinet had offered minimal guidance – so he felt he could pick and choose from what had gone before.

He recorded his thoughts in a Cabinet memorandum in early 1917. They were later translated into legislative form after the Hughes Nationalist Party won government in May.

Then, on 18 July 1917, Edward Millen introduced the Australian Soldiers’ Repatriation Bill into the parliament.

It was a marvellous speech that lasted two hours. His concluding words were:

“I present these proposals in the hope that they will be received as an earnest attempt to meet the nation’s obligations to those who, on its behalf, have gone down into the valley of the shadow of death, and that they may be regarded as not altogether unworthy either of Australia, or of those who heroically fought and suffered in its defence.”

The wide-ranging bill introduced such things as:

- a separate repatriation portfolio;
- a Commission of seven honorary members (after much argie-bargie over models, paid v honorary, large v small, etc.);
- a permanent, paid departmental head – the Comptroller - to manage the administration, with Deputy Comptrollers/Commissioners in each State assisted by an honorary advisory board of citizens;
- it even prescribed that the administration in each capital city would be based in a single building (one-stop shop).

The states would be responsible for a wide range of services:

- registration of every returned soldier;
- general information and advice;
- vocational training;
- land settlement and housing;
- artificial limbs and other aids;
- care of dependants;
- post-medical treatment, hospital care;
- care of the disabled, homes and hostels;

Millen’s Bill immediately came under attack. He especially received a going over from the newly-formed Returned Soldiers and Sailors Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) which was becoming increasingly assertive. They said his proposals lacked substance.

Following assent on 28 September 1917, it took several months to complete the regulations and set up the administrative machinery which would give effect to the new Act. This was a critical part of the exercise, as the success or failure of early Repatriation administration rested heavily on the clarity and relevance of the regulations. Probably not unreasonably, the public and the press felt that it was taking too long. Senator Millen defended the delay. He pointed to the lack of precedent and the need to build a proper foundation. It mightn’t be perfect but it was the best he could do.



The Repat Office

The new Repatriation Commission came into being in January 1918. Millen was chairman of the seven honorary commissioners. Bonython, Grayndler, Sanderson and Gibson had been members of the previous Repatriation Fund executive. Moorehead was a private who had lost an arm and a leg at Gallipoli. The other commissioner was Lieutenant Colonel James Semmens who replaced Lieutenant Colonel Owen early on. The group met in the old Wool Exchange building in King Street.

The main role of these men was to interpret the regulations and determine claims referred from State boards. They were pivotal, because their early determinations built a corpus of precedent that would govern the scheme down the decades.

The administrative wing of the operation, the Repatriation Department, commenced 3 months later, on the 8th of April 1918. Its national office was co-located with the commission in the King Street building, and the Victorian state office was in Jolimont. The structure of the Department was an interesting hybrid of public and private sector elements. It was strongly influenced by previous structures such as the War Councils and Repatriation Fund.

The first department head, Comptroller, was Nicholas Colston Lockyer. He was reputedly a tough, very hard-working career public servant from NSW. They said he had the penetrating power of a hundred-ton gun. He was seconded specifically to set up Repatriation. He stayed only a few weeks after the Department began but made a major contribution to its formation.

Criticism was never far away. The Melbourne press was full of stories of delay, confusion and petty corruption. Less than a fortnight after the Department opened its doors, 200 returned soldiers assembled outside Parliament House in Melbourne to complain about procedures at the new Jolimont Repatriation offices.

Even a year later, complaints about Jolimont were still abroad. A public meeting at the Prahran town hall heard stories from ex-soldiers dissatisfied with the Department. One complainant said:

“I went in on Thursday at 10 a.m. to see the medical officer. I was told to come back early on Saturday. I got there at 8.30 a.m. and waited until 5 to 12 and was then told that the doctor would see no more patients. I was told to come back the next Tuesday at 10.30 a.m., and I arrived at 10.15. after an arrangement with the clerk I managed to see the doctor at 20 to 5. on the Saturday morning a soldier in uniform had told the boy who was on the door at the doctor’s room that he was on 2/6 if he went in next. the soldier went in next.”

In the recently published ‘*Concise History of Repatriation in Australia*’, Professor Philip Payton records that the *Huon Times* in Tasmania said that frustrated soldiers sang a new refrain “*when you’re standing on the mat at the office of repat*”

It must have been fairly rough and ready. The Department was described as being dominated by men more experienced with ‘bomb and bullet’ than with ‘pen and pencil’. Perhaps predictably, given that the system was based on rigorous checks, evidence of excessive bureaucratic zeal began to emerge.

Lockyer even had to issue detailed instructions on which documents were to be kept in special jackets, and I was interested to learn that he had a system of coloured inks for minute papers to designate the various state offices. (It reminded me of a later Victorian Deputy Commissioner who was the only officer in Victoria permitted to mark a file with a red pen!)

One of the main complaints of the day was that there was too much reliance on sustenance payments to placate ex-soldiers until they could be given Repatriation assistance. Because of increasing unemployment as more and more returned, sustenance was made available to all men registered for employment until a suitable job could be found for them. So, at this stage, sustenance could be said to have been holding the whole thing together. In Victoria alone, 84,000 payments were made in the first 7 months of the Department’s operations. An important part of the Commission’s work was devoted to setting the payment rates for sustenance, deciding who was entitled to it, and adjudicating disputes.

The other primary responsibility of the Commission and the Department was medical care.

Just as it is today, a soldier’s medical documentation, or its absence, was decisive in determining eligibility for war pensions and repatriation benefits. Even for those who escaped from war relatively unscathed, the development of medical Repatriation was still important because of acceptance of the notion of ‘**aggravation**’ – where a pre-existing condition could be shown to have been ‘aggravated’ by military service. To help make decisions on whether a soldier’s condition was war-caused, Commission had access to an extensive network of medical officers and specialist opinion.

However, the innovative gem of medical repatriation which would serve Veterans so well for one hundred years was access to treatment by Local Medical Officers, or LMOs. By July 1920, no fewer than 687 general practitioners had signed up to the scheme. It was remarkably flexible - men suffering from war-caused illness could approach a GP directly and obtain prescriptions which would be honoured by any pharmacist, irrespective of where they lived.

Millen wanted the Repatriation Department to take over all medical services for ex-servicemen as soon as possible, including things like convalescent homes and hostels for TPI veterans. We see, for example, the introduction of the ANZAC hostels, which were established from private donations of properties. The hostel in North Road Brighton, known as Kamesburgh, was bought with a £25 000 donation by the Baillieu brothers, William and Arthur (Commission sold this facility to Bayside City Council for \$1 in 1995).



Senator Edward Millen, makes his address at the official opening of the Anzac Hostel in Brighton, Melbourne, 1919.

In mid-1920, the Department took over from Defence the responsibility for artificial limbs and appliances.

It was a little different with hospitals. After the war they continued with the military, but once the AIF was dissolved and the Defence machinery wound down, they could no longer justify having hospitals in the Defence Department. As we know they became a significant part of Repatriation administration.

By the end of the war, the climate was changing. The strong consensus of the early years had largely broken down. While there were still some traces of political bipartisanship, Repatriation was becoming increasingly politicised.

In the crucial period from 1919–20, the RSSILA was particularly influential in framing the direction of Repatriation policy. They had developed a good working relationship with the government, and especially with Billy Hughes. In fact, it is a very good early example of the political strength wielded by organised ex-servicemen.

The Association wanted to streamline co-ordination between Pensions, Repatriation and Defence, and they lobbied for a single Commission of three to manage all Repatriation-related matters, under the Minister for Repatriation.

Once again, in March 1920, Senator Millen was called upon to introduce a new Australian Soldiers' Repatriation Bill. However, gone was the flourish and lofty rhetoric of 1917. Now he was forced to defend and explain the system. It should be pointed out that much of that defence related to shenanigans in the War Service Homes Commission which had been established in 1919. That's another story.

As well as increasing pension rates, the new Repatriation Act delivered two important structural changes:

- firstly, war pensions were finally amalgamated with Repatriation (as the League wanted); and
- secondly, a new paid Commission of three was introduced, which would have both adjudicative and administrative functions.

Interestingly, debate around this Bill prompted speculation about the fate of the Department. There was always an assumption in the air that it was only transitional, as soldiers got back to civilian life. Clearly pensions would still need to be paid. The main focus continued to be on medical treatment and vocational training. Indeed, rehabilitation and vocational training programs were so successful that they ran out of clients within a decade.

Nevertheless, in some quarters there was growing scepticism about the need for an ongoing separate Department. Their view was that the Commission would eventually take over all administrative work from the Department, with fewer staff and dwindling functions.

This is not unlike propositions that the Productivity Commission is raising today. Questions were also raised about a standalone Repatriation administration following Mr Justice Toose's review of the system in the late 1970s.

Political and administrative commitment continued to wane over the next couple of years, and Repatriation did actually disappear for a time as a separate portfolio in the federal ministry under Bruce in the mid-1920s. It was then in the hands of the Repatriation Commission to provide administrative continuity and visibility, and ultimately to ensure Repatriation remained on government's radar.

Of course, the gradual disappearance of Repatriation from the headlines was partly due to the passing of the figures who had put the scheme together in the first place. In addition, however, although some scope for innovation remained - such as the introduction in 1922 of the Soldiers’ Children Education Scheme – the fact was that Repatriation support arrangements were now effectively in place, policy was settled, and it was down to process and general administration.

Looking back on this tumultuous time, one could say that the need to devise a Repatriation system and invent a structure to implement it, was a necessary response to unavoidable realities. It had to be done, or at least something had to be done.

What these people ultimately came up with, I submit, was far more than ‘something’. Time has shown that it was bold, durable and visionary. At the time it represented a new achievement in administrative organisation for the Australian Commonwealth – clearly groundbreaking.

Although many of the Repatriation provisions have changed over the decades, and the Commission and Department have been adapted and modified, the fundamentals put in place in the aftermath of World War 1 still hold, over 100 years later. There are many examples:

- the almost unparalleled partnership and consultation of public and private interests;
- federal government lead responsibility;
- stand-alone Department and separate ministerial portfolio;
- the comprehensive health care scheme; the pensions; care of dependants.

As then Governor-General Bill Hayden said in his 1993 foreword to the ‘last shilling’ by Clem Lloyd and Jacqui Rees (which work has informed much of this presentation):

“Who could seriously disagree with the final conclusion that, ‘without the repat. the quantum of human wretchedness, physical pain, mental anguish and poverty in the Australian community over three quarters of a century would have been incomparably greater?’”



A final word on Edward Davis Millen

He stepped down from the ministry in February 1923. In the following month he was granted leave of absence from the senate because of deteriorating health. Many believed it was caused, or at least exacerbated, by the burden of the enormous workload he carried over the war and post-war years.

He died in September 1923 at Caulfield. He was granted a State funeral and was buried in Rookwood cemetery in Sydney.

Prime Minister Hughes said of him:

‘No man did more to make this country what it is than Senator Millen.... as leader of the senate he had no equal’.