

AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCE — CAPABILITY

Grievance

MR H.T. JONES (Darling Range) [10.05 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Defence Industry regarding Australia's Defence Force capability in Western Australia. As a former naval sailor and officer of 30 years, I note the minister's service of 26 years, which was possibly more rigorous than my own. I take great interest in what the federal and state governments are doing to ensure that Australia's and Western Australia's sovereignty and trade interests are protected, and the Australian Defence Force plays an integral role in that defence.

According to the 2021 census, more than 55 000 Western Australians have previously served in the Australian Defence Force. Each year, hundreds leave the Defence Force and join our veteran community. The navy is obviously the largest employer of defence members in Western Australia. Even in my own electorate of Darling Range, some way from Garden Island and the ocean, the 2021 census revealed 80 people who are currently serving and more than 1 000 people who previously served. I daresay the numbers are higher as the census stated that no people living in Jarrahdale are currently serving in the Australian Defence Force, which I know to be incorrect—and I know who you are!

My experience as a navy supervisor and career manager tells me that despite the very good working conditions and remuneration in the Australian Defence Force, which are immune to the ups and downs of the economy, members leave in greater numbers when the economy is booming and jobs are plentiful and often high paying, as is the case now. Former Defence members with trade and operator skills adapt well to mining and construction work, and the fly-in fly-out conditions of extended absence from home and campsite accommodation are not too different from what they are used to. Some members also choose to leave because they have done their time and want a career that is perhaps more family friendly, so they can go home every night.

In the main, former Defence members demonstrate resilience, loyalty and self-discipline, and they are sought out by employers for these attributes. Defence members also invariably have unique military skills, which are costly to acquire and perishable as technology constantly updates. People who have left Defence, especially more recently, represent a great pool of potential contributors to the defence industry; they offer contemporary insights and the latest tactical and operations experience. We have a great opportunity to harness that wonderful resource and take advantage of their skills to further develop our local defence industry.

Like other members in this house, I have heard the media calls, particularly during the previous Turnbull and Morrison governments, to invest in the Australian Defence Force's capability to protect against threats to our sovereignty. There are justifiable concerns that the disposition of our defence forces and industries potentially leaves vulnerable our north west, a region that is responsible for export revenue in excess of \$100 billion per annum, and we have little to no sustained capability to protect this region of national significance.

I am not alone in raising this issue. The shire presidents of several regional local governments also advocate for action to ensure that appropriate Australian Defence Force capability is in place to meet the perceived threats. I would like to ask the Minister for Defence Industry what he has done to raise this issue with the commonwealth, and whether he has any update on the response from the commonwealth government.

Visitors — Kapinara Primary School

The ACTING SPEAKER (Ms A.E. Kent): Minister for Defence Industry, before you start, I would like to pay special welcome to Kapinara Primary School from City Beach on behalf of the member for Churchlands. Hi everyone!

Grievance Resumed

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Defence Industry) [10.09 am]: I thank the member for his grievance and for his service to the nation in the course of a longer career than my own and a very illustrious one. The member raised a couple of issues; first, the observation that many Australian Defence Force personnel are transitioning from service into civilian life here in Western Australia and that they represent a great asset. The member wants to know what we are doing to encourage them to stay in WA and contribute to our state. That is the first thing. The second issue was his concern, which I share, about the allocation of defence assets and capability to our part of the continent.

We can be very proud as a government of what is being done for ex-service personnel. We recognised at the start of the last term of government that many people were potentially considering leaving the Defence Force in Western Australia. I think about 300 people or so annually transition out of their service for whatever reason and look for somewhere to settle, often with families. Potentially they represent a great asset to the state. We were very focused on trying to find skilled labourers and others and encouraged them to come to Western Australia during the last term and we are even more focused at the moment. At the last election, we committed to quadrupling the

amount of money contributed to the Anzac Day Trust, which goes towards measures in the field of veteran support in Western Australia.

We actively sought to focus most of our money on transitioning defence personnel, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, it has pretty much been identified widely—we did it and it was identified during the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide—that one of the best things we can do to mitigate against the likelihood of people suffering from the trauma that they have encountered and being vulnerable to that later on is to successfully transition them at the end of their service. They can go from one environment in which they have made a valuable contribution, are respected, have a support structure around them and feel a sense of worth to another environment, rather than them becoming isolated and potentially vulnerable to spiralling, with the health implications that are associated with that. We allocate about three-quarters of the money that we contribute—about \$1.3 million a year—to the Anzac Day Trust for the delivery of services to encourage the successful transition of veterans. Patching them after they are damaged is more the job of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. It has a lot more money, resources and capability to achieve that. We do a bit of that, but mostly we focus on transitioning. One of the things that we have done is to allocate \$400 000 to the defence industry veterans employment scheme, which the member may be familiar with, and which is administered by the Minister for Education and Training. It offers 80 scholarships to eligible veterans. Essentially, if they see that there is a job for them in the defence industry—we will assist them to identify potential employers and look for those opportunities—they can get a \$5 000 scholarship to get the skills that they require to transition from defence into that job. It is a brilliant focus and idea, and I think it will be replicated nationally because it is such a good program.

We have also committed \$994 800 to a collaboration between the Returned and Services League of Australia in Western Australia and Working Spirit. Together, they will very much focus on transitioning. They are creating a portal to enable veterans to identify employment opportunities in not only the defence industry, but also other industries right across the state of Western Australia. Working Spirit will be doing a lot of very hard on-the-ground work to connect veterans to potential employers. Working Spirit's Karyn Hinder has a great track record of doing things such as something that is similar to speed dating—picking up veterans and putting them in front of a potential employer, who has already indicated that they want to employ a veteran. That will be a great program. It will be continually assessed, but I think it will make a significant contribution. I think we are leading the nation in transitioning people. It will be very successful and, again, it will help the state. We value veterans; they represent a great asset and are great contributors, but it will also help ameliorate potentially negative consequences for people who have served and are vulnerable to the trauma they have experienced.

With regard to defence in Western Australia, the member would have seen that the federal government—I commend it for doing so—has committed to a force posture review. It is calling it a strategic review that incorporates a force posture review. It is undeniable that Western Australia is under-defended. We have less than five per cent of ADF personnel posted to Western Australia, which is the lowest proportion anywhere in the country other than Tasmania, and I do not think it is under any threat from the penguins in Antarctica! If we look at it on a per capita share, which is a bit parochial, we do not get our share. But we do not look at it in those terms; we look at it in terms that our third of the continent should be defended. The Australian Defence Force should defend Australia. We generate, out of the Pilbara predominantly, some 40 per cent of export revenue for the nation and it is vulnerable. A wonderful reserve regional surveillance unit in the Pilbara regiment operates there, but that is it. The 13th Brigade is a fantastic brigade, but it is predominantly a reserve organisation. I commend Brigadier Chaloner, who commands the brigade, for recently deploying the 10th Light Horse to the Kimberley for an exercise. We do not really exercise much other than the Pilbara regiment in the Pilbara. It is time that the ADF looked at moving more soldiers, capability and fighting capability of the Army and the Air Force to Western Australia. The Air Force pretty much does not operate in Western Australia, other than to pass through. I raised this with the Minister for Defence a couple of weeks ago, and I will continue to raise it. Fortunately, the federal government has committed to this review. We look forward to the results.