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**SIMON LEWIS PSM
SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY
PARKES, CANBERRA
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Simon Lewis:

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet today. I acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region. I would also like to acknowledge and welcome other Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people who may be attending today's event. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have proudly served in every conflict and peacekeeping operations in Australia, in which Australia has been involved from the Boer War to the present day. And although there's never been a requirement in the Australian Defence Forces for individuals to identify their racial identity, the Department of Veterans Affairs provides benefits and entitlements to all eligible veterans, including indigenous veterans and their families.

Today, I would like to acknowledge all our current and existing indigenous defence personnel and our indigenous veterans and their families and acknowledge the contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to make in Australian Defence Forces. I would also like to acknowledge my colleagues from the Secretary's board who have made time in their very busy diaries, I don't know how you do it but thank you for making the time to come along this morning. The large cohort from my own department, thank you so much for coming as well, as well as many work colleagues I recognise from different parts of my career and with whom I've shared a wide range of work experiences, many highs and a few lows.

And so for today, and I have to say, I'm a little daunted by this very impressive audience. I would like to talk about three things. Firstly, I think I should tell you something about my own story and about my career and a few lessons I've learned along the way. Secondly, my time as the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs leading up to its current transformation programme, and what I predict will be its exciting future. And thirdly, a few thank yous and then open for questions. So, going right back, I was born in Adelaide. My dad was one of the 993,000 Australians who served in World War II then returning home where he eventually met and married mum and a year later, along I came, closely followed on an annual process by a sister and a brother. And then four other siblings arrived as we grew up in Melbourne, and then we moved to Canberra each time following dad's work opportunities with the Australian public service.

Although we were not well off, we always had enough to get by. We all received a good education and were supported in a range of sporting and other activities. And I now look back in some wonder as to how my parents were able to achieve that with seven children. We had a stable family upbringing, we were all much loved and instilled with good values. Despite achieving excellent academic results in my final year, at St Eddies in Narrabundah, just over the way there, my initial efforts of university did not go well. It's true that I became an excellent

pool player and won loads of money playing poker. But I'm sure that dropping out of law school was a blessed relief both to the school and to me.

In need of a job, I started work as a gardener with the ACT Parks and Garden Service then part of the Australian public service and I loved the outdoor work. I was nonetheless convinced by the dad after a few months to sit for the APS entrance examination and was successful in joining the Bureau of Statistics as a base grade clerk in 1976. I loved the work in the ABS and I was doing well. Eight years later, I'd been promoted steadily and was then acting in the equivalent of an EL2 position. And during that period, I'd gone back to uni part time and gained a BA in economics and statistics and postgraduate qualifications in public administration and computing studies. Also, during this period, I met my future wife, Ann, at the ABS and we were married in 1995.

With strong assurances from senior management at the ABS that I would advance further and probably considerably further should I stay and given that I was really enjoying the work I was doing, and I knew everybody, it was a hard decision for me to leave the ABS, but I wanted to try different things. I worked for nearly a year as a statistical consultant on the main committee set up by the Hawke government, which recommended the abolition of the two-airline policy then existing in Australia.

In 1986, I transferred to the Department of Defence. For three years I worked in what was then known as the Defence Logistics Organisation, with my work mainly focused on reviews and initiatives to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of Defence Logistics. As I recall, driving change across the fence at that time was very difficult. And our efforts were often unappreciated particularly by the military. However, substantive promotional opportunities at the time were sparse, so I applied for a position in the finance department and was immediately successful for a promotion in the fledgling Asset Sales Task Force set up as a division in the department.

It would turn out that most of the next two decades for me were spent in the finance portfolio, either in the department or the office of asset sales which was created to manage the growing privatisation programme, which emerged in the mid-1990s. In the early years however, I worked on a range of asset sales problematic for one reason or another. The sale of Cockatoo Island, probably one of the best hospital passes ever thrown from the defence department to the finance department, that island initially slated for \$100 million in net sale proceeds in the 1987 Keating May economic statement was never going to be sold commercially. Then there was the sale of ANL, famously headlined by the then transport minister, Larry Burton as being a business that you couldn't sell for a dollar, and he was right.

And then we had the Moomba Sydney Gas Pipeline system, a system which AGL had initially set out to construct in the early 1970s, but which was nationalised by Rex Connor during the Whitlam era and designed to remain forever in government ownership. And in order to achieve that aim, Rex Connor shackled the pipeline assets with individual veto rights held by each of the dozen or so cooper base and gas producers and by AGL, as well as a right of first refusal on

any sale by AGL. So, the hardest of these sales was the pipeline sale. As part of a small team, we tried to sell the pipeline in 1992, but were thwarted in short order by decisions of the New South Wales Supreme Court finding in favour of AGL, in terms of its contractual rights and rejection of legislation in the senate designed to affect the sale.

The fate of this sale came to the time when my wife Ann and I now had two young daughters, Katrina and Jacinta. It was probably the most stressful time of my working life. From that time on, I resolved to be more selective about roles I took on and to be firmer in giving my advice, but also Ann had reduced her working hours to help balance our family life. In 1993, I was given the opportunity this time as acting branch head to have a second crack at the sale of the pipeline system. And after an immense amount of hard work by a small team and through a complex series of negotiations, we managed to affect the sale around lunchtime on the 30th of June 1994, which was just as well because the legislation necessary to give effect to that sale was going to lapse at midnight on the very same day.

Just three weeks before that was looking to be a dim prospect indeed as we had yet to finalise agreements with any of AGL or the gas producers and did not have ACCC agreement to the regulatory apparatus necessary to address the vertical integration competition issues. We also have had issues to address with the states, given that we were seeking to put in place legislative machinery to deal with open access to a central infrastructure a year before the open access legislation recommended by Professor Hilmer was enacted across the country. I learned my first big lesson in a power of a deadline when all the necessary approvals came through over a very short period and I had my first asset sale.

Over the coming decade, particularly upon the election of the Howard government in 1996, a wide range of asset sales would have followed, but notably for me the second tranche of the Telstra public offer and the first and second tranches of the airport trade sales. Subsequently, I lead the team running the sale Sydney Airport. The coordinated attacks by Islamic terrorists since known as 9/11, occurred a couple of days before the office of asset sales was due to receive final bids for the sale. Walking to the offices of our advisers, part of the US based Citigroup investment bank, the morning after the attacks, I was musing about what effect these attacks might have on the sale. But it only took a moment upon seeing the huge security presence around the base of the office tower to understand that the impact would be severe.

The government took our advice to ice up the bid process until capital and debt markets had stabilised. This pause lasted nearly a year before the sale process was re-commenced by accepting final bids from tenderers. But by then I had moved to the budget group of the finance department. I found that my asset sales experience helped me immensely when I returned to the finance department. Not only had I learned some hard lessons from failed projects, but I'd gained some much experience in building strong teams and delivering major projects to meet government objectives. In most cases, there was a substantial policy development component as well. In fact, the range of privatisation projects had extended widely across the economy to include the air, land and

sea components of the transport sector, the banking and telecommunications sector, the pharmaceutical, real estate, agriculture etc.

It had also helped build my resilience and allow me to develop my capacity to advise government usually through the finance minister, but often with other ministers as well on complex projects and also to handle external accountabilities such as senate estimates and related parliamentary inquiry, media and stakeholder management. I had one year in budget group. Kathryn Campbell and I as division heads split the responsibility for all the agency advice units between us that year, before I was promoted to Deputy Secretary of Asset Management Group. The third tranche of the Telstra Public Offer Programme was a particularly difficult sale. I knew it would be difficult years before it got underway which is why I advised the then Secretary Ian Watt that I was not interested and suggested alternative leads.

However, when the time for the sale came, Ian could be very persuasive and eventually convinced me. At his darkest point I seem to recall advising the Secretary and the minister that we'd spent around \$50 million we were at risk of not selling a single share. We were at that time only several weeks out from a no-go decision as to whether to launch the offer and issue that prospectus and lacked Telstra's support for the offer and a range of other key approvals. But again, demonstrated how powerful a deadline could be, all fell into place in a very short time frame to enable a successful launch and then sale.

Now, just recently I had the chance to go to the movies with Ann and we saw the Darkest Hour, a movie focus on Churchill around the time of Dunkirk in World War II. And it made me think about circumstances in our own lives, obviously on much smaller scales, where we've had our own darkest hours and how we have dealt with them at those times. Reflecting on my own experience leading projects at these dark times, and lots of projects have dark times, I would offer the following thoughts. Firstly, try to keep a clear head even if you are absolutely under the pump, find some time to think without distraction. Be persistent and resilient. If your strategy remains sound, stick the course. Maintain a sense of optimism, you're not dead until you're dead. This is particularly important to the broader team. If they feel all is lost, then their performance will drop, and the team will dissipate.

Even the little things can count. For example, cancelling team meetings because of a crisis might seem sensible if time is precious, but it's highly likely to have a great effect on team performance or morale. And lastly, try to create some personal life balance. For me, my wife and two daughters, my large close extended family, and a group of friends I've considered good mates for four decades now, provide ballast to whatever storms may be blowing professionally. Everyone needs to have ballast of some sort in their lives.

Just to round at my career background I transferred from finance to defence as a deputy Secretary in defence support in 2009. It certainly helped me that I had worked previously in the Defence Department, but also that positioned me well two years later to compete for the role of associate Secretary of the department, from which position I was then promoted to the Secretary of the Department of

Veterans Affairs. Turning now to my second topic, my time with DVA, I was honoured indeed to have been appointed by Prime Minister Gillard in April 2013 as Secretary and considered myself particularly fortunate to have been appointed in the lead up to the key Anzac's centenary, which meant that I will be Secretary during a period where the department was responsible for a range of services commemorating the centenary of key World War I events, such as the departure of the convoy of Australian and New Zealand forces from Albany in October 1914, the Gallipoli landings in April 15, the battles of Pozières and Fromelle in 15, Polygon Wood and Passchendaele in 17 and Villers-Bretonneux in 1918.

And just three weeks ago, preceding the centenary commemoration of the Battle of Villers-Bretonneux was the opening of the Sir John Monash centre. Less than three years from the time that the then Prime Minister, Tony Abbott had announced its construction. The centenary of Anzac has been Australia's most important period of national commemoration. Marking 100 years since our involvement in the First World War, the Anzac's centenary has been a time to honour the service and sacrifice of our original Anzacs, and the generations of Australian servicemen and women who have defended our values and freedoms in wars, conflicts, and peace operations throughout a century of service.

The Anzac's Centenary national programme administered by DVA, has been founded on three objectives, education, engagement and empowerment for communities and individuals. But the programme has not just been about events of 100 years ago. This year for example, major events being held to commemorate Australian military service include the 75th anniversary of the Battle of the Atlantic, the 50th anniversary of the Battle at fire support bases Coral and Balmoral, and the 65th anniversary of the Korean War Armistice.

And privileged though I have been to oversight this programme over the past five years, for me the real highlight of being appointed Secretary has been the opportunity to help mobilise the creative energies of the staff across the Department of Veterans Affairs, it is great to see so many of you here today, to understand the need for accelerated change and at least as importantly to convince the government of the need to invest in the transformation of the department.

Not long after I arrived, we organised a capability review to DVA and a year later, a functional efficiency review was also conducted, both confirming that while DVA staff had a very high commitment to the DVA mission of supporting our veterans, substantial changes were required to the department's operating model, information and communications technology, organisational design and culture in order to help our staff to meet the changing needs of our veteran community, and particularly the needs of younger veterans. Much of this was told to us directly by staff of DVA who provided extensive input to both reviews.

These reviews highlighted the DVA's IT systems, over 200 in number, and some dating back to the early 1980s, were at critical at risk of failing. Further, the stove pipe nature of most client service delivery functions, and the inability to provide online services and support, were significant limitations to helping our

veterans. In general terms, staff were only able to focus on their own area of business be that compensation, hearing aids, home appliances, whatever, but not the overall needs of individual clients and that could be frustrating to many clients. Early consultation and engaging with the veteran community also highlighted the need to tackle three difficult problems affecting the veteran community, namely homelessness, incarceration, and veteran suicide.

Compounding this complexity, was the complexity of DVA legislation with three principal acts governing veteran entitlements which made it difficult for DVA staff, clients and their advocates alike, to establish entitlements to DVA services and benefits. Yet a further challenge, was that approximately one in five ADF members were clients of the department at the time of their discharge, and approximately another one in five would become clients as veterans post discharge, which actually meant that most veterans were not clients of DVA. For many, that would not matter but for some, it would, and yet DVA did not know who they were and had no way of reaching directly out to them.

When surveyed our clients, those we knew about, continued to indicate a high level of satisfaction with DVA services with 83% satisfied or very satisfied in the most recent survey. However, when drilling down further into these clients' survey numbers, it was apparent that the percentage had reduced significantly since the previous survey at 89%. More importantly, it was the younger cohort from operations post 1999 who were the least satisfied with nearly one in two dissatisfied with the service of the department. Now DVA's client mix is rapidly changing. DVA still has 25% of its clients over 85 years of age versus 2% across a broader community.

But of course, many of these older veterans or their widows who have generally been very satisfied with DVA services are now rapidly passing on. With the numbers of younger veterans increasing, we could expect that the satisfaction trend line would continue to worsen unless we took action to better serve this younger cohort. In essence then, DVA's business case for transformation was based on the need to tackle the above challenges and to better set up the department for meeting the needs of veterans and particularly younger veterans in the 21st century.

DVA adopted a strategic partnering approach to deliver the business case. This approach continues to be important to us. Key partners, many who are in the front row here, include the Department of Human Services to deliver ICT transformation and business process reform to support underlying technological change and digitalization of services. The Department of Defence to deliver transformational outcomes with a particular focus on improving the transition process for clients, the Department of Social Services for grants programme management, the Department of Health to facilitate liaison and cooperation on health related matters, relating to transformation, and Price Waterhouse Coopers providing specialised advisory services on the design, setup and management of the Transformation Programme Management Office.

DVA's transformation will of course be a multi-year journey. The government accepted our second pass business case in the budget before last, and this paved

the way for veteran centric reform. In that budget, the government provided \$166 million over four years to initiate the transformation programme. Importantly, our transformation is also aligned with broader government reform agendas such as leveraging whole of government ICT capabilities as much as possible. DVA will not be building its own expensive systems but through our delivery partners, we'll be adapting and reusing those already available, particularly within DHS.

Early improvements will be driven through DHS's welfare payment infrastructure transformation programme, and progressively all veteran income support payments will be managed through this programme. In November 2017, DVA's online portal called My Service was expanded to allow all veterans with a defence electronic service record to register and submit initial liability claims. As of 9 April, there are over 3300 registered users who have lodged claims already. Functionality will continue to expand for this new portal in line with client feedback.

Transformation across all business areas is typified by our work in digitising paper files. The digitalization boost commenced in October 2017, and now over 17 million client file pages are available for immediate access to staff. We no longer transport 30,000 physical files between offices across Australia each month. We want our services to be widely known and easily accessible when they're needed. As part of transformation, DVA has developed a strategy to enable the torrent of services to client's segments. It will provide an informed view of how DVA services its clients in the future and guide a consistent client experience. Through the torrent of services and the targeting the veteran cohorts in need of early intervention, DVA intends to improve veteran health.

One pilot DVA is running seeks to improve transition support to ADF members and their families in civilian life. The pilot includes special operations forces members and their families in the first instance. But the pilot is trialling a My Service solution aimed at providing a one-system solution to all ADF members needing to register a claim, and a dedicated case manager as needed. Another pilot is defence led through joint health command and includes representatives from DVA and the Commonwealth Superannuation Corporation. This pilot is seeking to develop a single process to improve the complex and fragmented medical assessment processes which separate and ADF members can experience, and it's been run from pause with the army barracks.

The process aims to provide greater security for transitioning members, minimise duplication across agencies and reduce requirements for multiple assessments after discharge. Participation is voluntary and ADF members undergo review by a DVA representative and, if appropriate, are assessed by a specialist occupational physician. The pilot which is showing promise will be evaluated to assess effectiveness and scalability for other defence health arrangements.

A further pilot is about reaching out and engaging with veterans, former serving members and their families who have not had prior contact with DVA. Australia Post is one of Australia's most recognisable institutions and partnering with

them gives DVA a new opportunity to engage with potential and existing DVA clients and their families. Information about DVA programmes and services are available via a range of brochures, Australia Post existing iMac facilities as well as installed print and digital posters and the Australia post concierge.

Finally, we are piloting new ways of reaching out to veterans and their families by providing additional information points throughout rural and regional Australia where no permanent government shop front exists. The DHS mobile service centres act as an office on wheels for a range of government services including Centrelink, Medicare, Child Support and Australian Hearing. Staff from these centres have been trained to deliver a veteran information service. Improving the transition from military to civilian life is a key focus. Each year around five and a half to 6000 ADF members leave the military. The government is committed to ensuring transition is as seamless as possible.

A joint transition task force has been established to identify barriers to effective transition and to report back to ministers with solutions. The task force engage and sort the views of approximately 600 current and former ADF members throughout 2017, as well as perspective of expert organisations and governments stakeholders. Through this consultation the task force confirm the individual experience of transition varies, as impacted by the reason members are leaving, their willingness to leave, their length of service and the level of preparation they're made for civilian life.

The task force has provided a report an action plan to government including recommendations to improve the transition process. Early engagement of ADF members is another key element of our transformation journey. The model aims to ensure the current and former ADF members are known to DVA now and into the future, thus facilitating earlier access to DVA services and support. ADF members who joined after one January 2016 and those who separated from the ADF after 27 July 2016 are now all being registered with DVA. This includes 12,000 current and former members with whom DVA did not actually have any relationship before. When members do approach DVA in the future, we will already know them and be in a better position to help them more quickly.

We have substantially improved our coordination with state and territory government through the establishment of both ministerial and officials' forums, meeting on a regular basis to tackle issues around homelessness, incarceration, and suicidal veterans. DVA has also substantially increased the scope of mental health support to veterans, for instance, we now provide immediate access to mental health treatment services without the need to establish liability to anyone who has served a day in the full time ADF. DVA is also running several pilot studies aimed at suicide prevention. Further rollout will be based on the evidence and outcome from the current pilots.

We are using data driven insights to better engage with our clients in a proactive way where in the past we had to wait for veterans to come to us. We are now using analytics to help identify veterans at risk, so we can get them help early to prevent chronic health problems. Our transformation is being delivered in line with best practise internal and external governance and assurance mechanisms.

Implementation itself is a complex and long-term challenge. In addition to making significant inroads into preparing DVA's business and workforce culture to deliver immediate and future goals, we are working with partners to deliver what has been promised this year. We are currently on track to deliver.

For the year ahead, the government announcement in last week's budget to continue funding of a DVA transformation with a further \$112 million is very welcomed indeed. Under our transformation agenda, the future DVA will be an agency focused on policy, stakeholder relationships and service commissioning. In the future, most of our clients will be able to self-manage through online means, much like most of us do our banking and purchasing today. This will enable staff of the future DVA to focus on those clients with complex and multiple needs based on an integrated whole of client view and effective case management systems. The DVA of the future will continue to play a critical role in policy development to drive the agenda and provide guidance for better policy outcomes for veterans.

Veterans will be better able to access their benefits and needed services and interact with the department in ways of their choosing. But it'll also be an exciting time for DVA staff who are keen to better deliver on DVA's mission and to be part of DVA's modernisation. As I finish up my remarks on DVA and its transformation journey, the last point I'd like to make is that as we come to the end of the Anzac's centenary, we are also celebrating the centenary of the establishment of the department itself, initially known as the Repatriation Department in 1918. It's important for us to understand our past as we met our future because what we learn is that although the DVA mission of supporting those who have served really has not changed over the last century, the ways in which that support has been provided to veterans have changed substantially over the decades. Our current transformation is just the latest of many changes in service delivery.

On a personal note, as many of you will already know, I am delighted that the government has appointed Liz Cosson to replace me as Secretary. After some persuasion, I convinced Liz to transfer back to DVA as my deputy two years ago. And during that time, she's done a marvellous job both in oversight in DVA's current service delivery business as well as champion the transformation programme. And I am very confident that Liz is the right person to take DVA on the next phase of its transformation journey. And for those of you who track gender balance across portfolios, then my departure makes a big contribution. Not just because the Secretary's board with nine and nine now has gender parity, but Liz will also assume the roles of president of the repatriation commission and chair of the military rehabilitation compensation commission, both counting as separate statutory appointments in this portfolio, still three.

My chief of staff Tara suggested I might like to just in closing off give one helpful tip to public servants coming along to today's session. And so, taking up her suggestion, I offer a tip in the area of briefing ministers. Now, I don't like pulling briefs and I have done so rarely both in DVA and in prior organisations. But when it has been needed, the most common reason I can think of has been what I perceive to be insufficient articulation of the downside of any recommended

courses of action. Now I can understand why public servants can become keen advocates for proposed causes of action, but this does not take away their obligations to advise the minister comprehensively and objectively regarding the options, the pros and cons, and the strategies for mitigating risks and likely criticisms. Only then can we say the minister has received balanced advice, supporting our recommendations and have him or her ready to back us if the articulated risks and/or criticisms emerge. And of course, all important advice must be in writing.

Turning to my final brief point before I open for questions, I'd just like to offer a few thanks. First and foremost, I would like to put on record how extremely grateful I am and always have been to my wife, Ann, who has supported me so steadfastly throughout my career and who has had to make many sacrifices above her own in order to do so. A big thanks also to my two daughters, who have had to deal with a distracted or absent dad more than I would have liked. As a general proposition, the further you advance in your career, the more you rely on others. That has certainly been my experience and so to everyone who has helped me not just over my last five years with DVA, but throughout the course of my APS career, thank you so much. And to everyone that's come along today. Thanks a lot for coming along. Thank you.

Piers:

Hi, Piers Courage from PM&C, I'm just wondering, you spoke a little bit before about resilience and optimism. And I'd like to know a little bit more about how they've contributed to getting you where you are.

Simon Lewis:

Well, I think one of the core skills, thanks for the question, it's actually a corporate pastor thing for a public servant these days, is to have resilience simply because in the public service, you're going to get buffeted as just part of the nature of our work. I think my cabinet skills probably weren't all that strong early on, and was only through, I think, to take on some difficult projects and sort of developing the skills to knuckle down that I actually worked out how to work my way through crisis situations. Apart from the tips I gave before, I always used to say to my daughters and others that, when you feel like you're really under the pump, take three deep breaths, it's nothing like taking three deep breaths to realise that when you get that oxygen in your lungs, you can start thinking an issue through.

But in terms of the projects I've been involved, particularly in the asset sales area, which I think is a bit of an adrenaline rush, I see a few former asset sellers in the room here, it is a huge adrenaline rush but you're going to have both the peaks and you're going to have the troughs and so you've got to have the capacity as an individual to deal with those and also to see a way through. And even when it looks darkest, you'd be surprised they're often ways through, just got to keep a clear head and work your way through those issues.

I always thought that one of the hardest things to actually get the alignment with was first initially the alignment across the team, but secondly the alignment back through your minister, because you got to have your minister completely connected in to where you are as well. And if that relationship is well managed, then you're along by on the track to success. Thank you.

Carrie: Just a quick one, I'm wondering if you could share the difficulties and possibly the challenges with the changing ministers, the multiple ministers that we had over a very short period of time.

Simon Lewis: More challenging for me than you is the first thing I'd say.

Carrie: Possibly.

Simon Lewis: One of the most important relationships you have when you're a Secretary, is that the relationship you have with your minister. And if it's a strong relationship, then I think it helps you a hell of a lot, and helps you both a lot, because ministers can't achieve much but through their departments, but departments aren't going to get much done unless they have alignment back with their minister. So, you're right, Carrie, I had six ministers over my time as Secretary of DVA. And I think one of my key challenges was to quickly get on the wavelength of that new minister as quickly as possible.

So particularly in the last several years, I would go along as soon as possible with Liz and we would have a chat with the minister as soon as we possibly could to get a sense for their priorities for us as a bit of a download, in particular we would have a tendency to try and sort of load them up too quickly, because it's always a raft of issues that have to be dealt with, but the core thing was to actually get on the same wavelength as that minister. I'm happy that we'll manage just to have one minister through to the next election and we'll see what happens after the election. But I certainly think that will be desirable thing to have. It's suffice to say that by the time we have a minister in their second year, it really makes a big difference to their capacity to sell the agenda of the department to engage with our stakeholders and to work with the department in relation to the various challenge that we're facing. So, fewer ministers, from my perspective, would've been a good thing.

Male: I took a job in the defence portfolio some time ago and one of the things that shocked me going into it with having no prior background, was how the issues that affect the older veterans are so very different from the issues that affect the younger veterans and the needs between them are so far apart. How do you approach that philosophically when you have limited resources, you have presumably a bunch of these needs to fit on a spreadsheet that makes sense? How do you balance the needs of very diverse stakeholders of which you can't let any of them down?

Simon Lewis: That's a really good question. Thank you for that question. I think to some extent the answer to your question is you just got to ask them, you start by asking them. I think that we've got a lot better at actually asking our clients, asking our veterans for their opinion and getting them directly involved in their interaction with the department, identify what the pain points are and identify what's working and what's not working. I think if you go back to those stats I've provided before in terms of age and cohort, we've actually got three cohorts in DVA, the oldest cohort of those are those arising around the World War II. And as I said before, that that grip is rapidly passing on. But, we knew exactly how they wanted their services delivered and now are very happy with us.

The younger cohort which we are now constantly working with are saying to us that we were not set up to deliver service in the way they want. So, we've had to adjust many elements of our service delivery model to actually better meet their needs, a lot of those because they're part of the digital age and we're a department which was not actually set up the digital age. So, we are rapidly becoming a department that actually operates in the digital age, people can now lodge their claims via their device. We'll build the capacity for them to be able to process their claims online, for many of them and particularly for some of the more streamline claims, we should be able to automate the whole process.

So, for many musculoskeletal conditions, provided we know what the nature of their service has been, we will be able to identify immediately that they would meet the requirements for compensation and let's say some musculoskeletal conditions. Why even put them through process of establishing their claim where we actually know they're going to pass the requirement? So, we're working out ways to essentially automate that whole process. So, as I said before, our intent would be that for a large majority of interaction with the department for the more straightforward nature of services, we'll be able to provide support straightaway that will allow staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs to put more effort, more focus on those who have greater complexity of needs and multiple needs.

And for me, that actually requires case management support, and again that involves significant changes to our operating model to make that work well. But that's a journey we're on right now. That's a good question. It's all driven by the changing mix between the older cohort, the needs of the older veterans versus the needs of the younger one. And there's a whole new opening up area here, what about the service of those who are drone operators and the like, who are actually operating quite remotely but could be experiencing situations remotely, but it still has an effect on them personally, affect their mental health? Thank you for the question.

Mark: Simon, Mark Cavanagh from Defence. In 42 years, you've seen some significant changes in the public service, not just the loss of two ladies and the change of the Second Division to the SES, the loss of-

Simon Lewis: Pays with our guards.

Mark: That's right, the loss of permanency of secretaries but also the rise of the members of parliament staff and ministerial staff as some of whom are timeless, perhaps they are another force that the minister might be able to achieve things through and some who at times, I would reflect, think they are the minister. But I wonder if you could just reflect on how you deal with those which sometimes do perhaps test resilience and what tips you might like to pass on.

Simon Lewis: Thanks. Was that about the relationship with minister's officers?

Mark: With minister's officers in particular their staff.

Simon Lewis:

Well, I think it goes without saying that if you're going to get things done as a department, then you're going to have a good relationship with your minister and with their office, that minister's office. And if you are unable to even have a good relationship with the minister but not with the office I think you got a problem, so I think it's really important that you work out a way across the senior ranks of any organisation that you get a good relationship going with the minister's office as well as the minister. I've been very pleased that in DVA we've had that strong relationship with both, but you need to understand your separate roles. And I am constantly reminding the department about the role of the partners versus the role of the minister's office. And particularly when I hear instructions from minister's office to pull a brief, minister's officers don't decide whether briefs get pulled or not, it's up to the minister what he does with brief that comes to the department.

Now, if the brief it's not up to scratch for some reason then I'll pull a brief myself if it needs to be pulled. But that doesn't change the nature of advice. And if the minister's office says and sometimes the trick is so, look its missing ABC or it's a little bit more then I'll say put in a supplementary because the supplementary achieves the purpose but you're not actually altering the effect of some of the written advice. I think it's just the nature of the operating environment, in Canberra these days Mark, we've got to be able to work with both ministers and minister's offices. I think it's eminently workable myself, yes the officers are bigger but they're still not big.

If a minister wants to get anything done, they're not going to get it done through the minister's office. They're going to get it done through their department, so I think you can make the relationship work and you actually have to in order to get the machinery government to work well. Thanks for the question.

Frances Adamson:

Last question then, pretend this is a press conference, last question.

Simon Lewis:

Last question.

Female:

Thanks, I'm Maureen Gray from Prime Minister and Cabinet. How are you? First of all, thank you, as a spouse of a veteran for the work that you're doing and changing the agenda that you're driving. The question I have is, you've been through an extensive career, has your leadership style changed and evolved in that time or have you kept a true north and adjusted slightly? I'm just curious as to how you do that.

Simon Lewis:

Thanks Maureen. I think we all grow and change over our whole lives, don't we? So, I think I'm quite a different person than I am 10, 20 or 30 years ago, I've changed a lot of that period of time. And perhaps some people here will be able to attest to that. But, one of the hardest lessons I had to learn was how to stop doing things and how to just work through others because, I initially used to be a bit of a perfectionist on briefs that went under my name, and I used to really have tight controls on work of the subsection or the section and then the branch. And I had to realise that I had to let go, I had to create a strong team, make sure they weren't owns of myself, get them aligned with my own thinking, and then let them go. And then it's amazing to see what they can produce. And

for me, the biggest single thing I learned was how to work through others rather than trying to do things myself. There are lots of others but in the interest of time I'll close there. Thanks.

Frances Adamson:

Thank you very much indeed, Simon for telling what I think everyone would agree is a very compelling tale, a true-life tale, the journey from National Park Service Gardener, to Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs at a time when you've clearly been transforming the department with the team that you've built. And I was reflecting as you were speaking, that the independent review of the APS just announced that the members of that panel could do a lot worse than perhaps start with a case study of the Department of Veterans Affairs over the last five years in terms of transformation and citizen centric service.

I'm sure everyone in the room, but particularly my fellow secretaries would want to compliment you on what looks to us very much like a textbook term as a Secretary, you arrived, you consulted, you built, you transformed, and you leave a team which actually I think it's fair to say, is going to be able to manage extremely well without you. That means as a tribute, that's exactly what's going to happen and you're going to be able to enjoy your retirement in a way frankly, that you hadn't done it in that textbook way, I suspect you wouldn't have.

So, can I thank you very much for sharing the journey with us also, for helpfully pointing out some of those learnings along the way as you put it. The power of deadlines, don't we all know it, but useful to be reminded of it, the hard lessons from failed projects and dark times. Again, we sometimes shy away from those, but I think you put it very clearly and it's something we know. I think there's a bit of a fad at the moment, an interest in failure and how we deal with it and I think there's plenty there for us to mine perhaps for a separate IPAA event on those sorts of things, but also how to build a strong team to achieve the government's objectives. You were very clear about that.

And also the power, your discovery point being reminded of the power of well-timed, clear, strong policy advice. I think what had us all riveted was you're not dead until you're dead. I would say, but this probably just reflects a slightly different foreign affairs approach, it's not over till it's over. But I think the sentiment is the same and the fact is, until things are settled, you're still in with a chance, not necessarily five minutes to midnight, I think you got it done 12 hours in advance, but it is just worth thinking about that. Sometimes we're inclined to give up a little bit early and there's always value in keeping going. A personal interest I'm sure everyone in the room, myself included, just to be reminded again of work life balance but of the importance of ballast in maintaining that balance. We sometimes talk of it as if it's easily achieved but the ballast and having friends of 40 years plus standing has obviously been very helpful in all of that too.

You mentioned the importance that you're attached to the Anzac's centenary. You mentioned Villers-Bretonneux at the end of a long list of battles and centenary commemorations. And of course, you and I had the real privilege of being that we're in the second row actually of 7000 strong group of Australians,

largely Australians and some French as well, at the Villers-Bretonneux commemoration last month. We stood in the pre-dawn cold, we stood in the post-dawn I think it was rain. We had something of an inkling of what it might have been like for those Australians serving on the Western Front all those years ago. And then, of course, we repaired with our prime minister, the French prime minister to the marque for coffee, and croissants, and all of those sorts of things.

But it was a tremendously moving occasion. And that was the day after the opening by the prime minister and French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, of the Sir John Monash Centre. And Simon was quietly in the background and yet the whole thing stood up in three years from beginning to end, it's an absolute triumph. For anyone who finds himself in France, near the Western front, near Villers-Bretonneux, it's an absolute must to go. And when you do go, please think of Simon, think of all of his colleagues who've really achieved something quite extraordinary in terms of telling in a very contemporary way, a tale that we all know should never be forgotten.

After that, we shared the journey back to Australia. We travelled from Paris together, we walk through the long, several kilometres of airport in Dubai, we had breakfast together, you told me the tale. We've both started off in Adelaide, we've pursued very different paths. You gave me a sense of the transformation of the department and your pride at Liz being able to take over your role.

So, for me, this was a reappraisal of all of that without the jet lag, and with a few more particular points that I think are of interest to all of us. So, thank you for being willing to share that in the way that you have. Everyone please let's thank and congratulate Simon on 42 years of service and a wonderful career.