New Minister for Veterans' Affairs

Senator the Hon. Michael Ronaldson has been appointed as the new Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of Anzac and the Special Minister of State. He was sworn in on 18 September 2013.

Immediately following their swearing in, and as their first official engagement, Senator Ronaldson joined Senator the Hon. David Johnston, Minister for Defence, the Hon. Stuart Robert MP, Assistant Minister for Defence, and the Hon. Darren Chester MP, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence, in laying a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Australian War Memorial.

Senator Ronaldson said he was honoured to be appointed the Minister for Veterans' Affairs. “It is a true honour to serve Australia’s veterans and their families. I want to learn from them, hear their concerns and do everything within my power to give them the support they so deserve,” he said.

Senator Ronaldson was born in Ballarat and holds a Bachelor of Law from Melbourne University. He worked as a barrister and solicitor before beginning his career in public service as a councillor for the City of Ballarat between 1981 to 1987.

He was later elected as the Federal Member for Ballarat in 1990, and served until his retirement in 2001. During this time he held the appointments of Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Transport and Regional Development and Chief Government Whip. Following his retirement from the House of Representatives, Senator Ronaldson was Co-chair of the Australian ex-Prisoner of War Memorial project in his home city of Ballarat.

The Minister was elected to the Senate for Victoria at the 2004 Federal Election, joining the Senate in 2005 and was re-elected in 2010. Immediately prior to the 2013 election he served as the Shadow Minister for Veterans’ Affairs and Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader of the Opposition on the Centenary of Anzac, and between 2007 and 2010 served as Shadow Special Minister of State and was Shadow Cabinet Secretary in 2008 and 2009.

Senator Ronaldson said his deep appreciation for the veterans’ affairs portfolio stems from an active role with the veteran community while in opposition.

“I took a great deal of time and interest in meeting with current and former serving members of the Australian Defence Force, as well as many war widows and family members. I travelled extensively, meeting with ex-service organisations and conducting more than 100 veterans’ forums with thousands of participants right across the country.”

Senator Ronaldson said the Government would work to ensure that veterans and their families are supported to live full and healthy lives.

“I am concerned to ensure that veterans’ families are not left behind in the recognition of service and sacrifice. We all need to remember that, while veterans made huge personal sacrifices in the defence of our country, their families also made sacrifices and they also deserve support and recognition,” he said.

Senator Ronaldson said the veterans’ affairs portfolio was a priority for the new Government, saying the Government had set several major goals, including:

- recognition of the unique nature of military service
- retention of a stand alone Department of Veterans’ Affairs
- tackling mental health challenges for veterans and their families
- supporting veterans through adequate advocacy and welfare services

“Our commitment to these four important pillars, combined with a genuine desire to serve the veteran community, will ensure we have the very best chance of delivering significant improvements to the health and wellbeing of veterans and their families,” the Minister said.

Gallipoli 2015 ballot opening soon

Australians planning to attend Anzac Day commemorations at Gallipoli in 2015 can apply for the ballot in the coming weeks. But there’s no need to rush – the ballot will be open for more than two months from the date it opens.

The Anzac Commemorative Site at Gallipoli can safely, securely and comfortably accommodate 10,500 people. In 2015, this will comprise places for 800 Australians, 2000 New Zealanders and up to 500 official representatives of the countries that served in the Gallipoli campaign. It is expected up to 250 of the official representatives will come from Turkey, the host nation.

Some of the places available to Australians will be reserved for special representatives, including direct descendants of Gallipoli veterans, widows of Australian First World War veterans, veterans of other conflicts and Australian secondary school students and their chaperones.

Widows of First World War veterans do not need to apply for the ballot and will be contacted separately by DVA regarding their interest in attending. Places for secondary school students and their chaperones will be allocated outside the ballot by State and Territory Governments. The remaining places (3000 double passes) will be open for all Australians to apply.

Advice will be provided to individuals on the ballot outcome shortly after the ballot closes early next year, to ensure those successful have enough time to organise and pay for their trip.

Those who have already booked a tour to Gallipoli in 2015, which includes attending official Anzac Day commemorative services, should speak to their travel agent or tour operator regarding arrangements if they are not successful in the ballot. Tour operators are not able to guarantee a place at the commemorations.

For information on ballot eligibility, visit the Gallipoli 2015 website: www.gallipoliz2015.dva.gov.au