



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Proof Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

Selected petitions from Queensland presented up to October 2014

(Public)

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BRISBANE

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON PETITIONS

Wednesday, 19 November 2014

Members in attendance: Mr Buchholz, Mr Hogan, Dr Jensen, Mrs Prentice, Ms Ryan.

Terms of reference:

Selected petitions from Queensland presented up to October 2014

WITNESSES

CHITHAM, Mr Edward Albert, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group 1
CROSS, Mr Robert William, Chairman, Rifle Company Butterworth Group 1
HANNAFORD, Mr Stanley Leonard, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group 1
MARSH, Mr Kenneth Neville, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group 1
STONE, Mr Gary, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group 1
McGrady, The Hon. Tony, Mayor, Mount Isa City Council 10
JOHNSTON, Mr Colin Henry, Managing Director, Barnabas Fund Australia Limited 14
FORBES, Mrs Tanya Louise, Founder, Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group 17

CHITHAM, Mr Edward Albert, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group

CROSS, Mr Robert William, Chairman, Rifle Company Butterworth Group

HANNAFORD, Mr Stanley Leonard, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group

MARSH, Mr Kenneth Neville, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group

STONE, Mr Gary, Member, Rifle Company Butterworth Group

Committee met at 10:01

Evidence from Mr Marsh was taken via teleconference—

Reclassification of the service of Rifle Company Butterworth

CHAIR (Dr Jensen): I welcome all witnesses and members of the public to the Petitions Committee hearing today. First of all, given that there are only four members here and the quorum is three, I move that a subcommittee be formed comprising me, Mr Buchholz, Mr Hogan and Mrs Prentice.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: So be it.

CHAIR: Under the rules of the House for petitions, the Petitions Committee is required to consider if petitions comply with the requirements for petitioning the House. If so, the petition may then be presented to the House and the committee may refer it to the relevant government minister for a response. The committee may also hold public hearings such as this into petitions, allowing both principal petitioners and government agencies to further consider the concerns raised in the petition and the response made.

I remind participants and interested parties that, in undertaking hearings on a petition, the committee is not endorsing or advocating the contents of a given petition. Nor are we able to grant the requests made in petitions. It is not the committee's practice to make any recommendations based on hearings of this kind. These hearings are an opportunity for participants to cover in more detail the issues raised in petitions, which, as we know, are restricted to 250 words, and for the committee to hear about people's experiences in engaging with the House of Representatives petitioning process.

Today we will begin the hearing by talking with former servicemen to discuss a petition which calls for the reclassification of the military service of Rifle Company Butterworth between 1970 and 1989. I remind witnesses that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings in the chambers themselves. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and will attract parliamentary privilege. Do you have any comment to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Mr Chitham: I have been involved in this activity since about 1999.

Mr Hannaford: I am the chief petitioner and also a member of the review group.

Mr Stone: I am a chaplain in the Army at the moment. I have served 25 years as an infantry officer and then 20 years as a chaplain. I have had seven operational deployments overseas. Four of them were warlike and three of them were peacemaking. One of the warlike operations I deployed on was Rifle Company Butterworth.

Mr Marsh: I am ex-Air Force. I did 20 years in the Air Force, including five years at Butterworth in the 1970s—two postings of 2½ years each.

CHAIR: You may make a brief opening statement, or we can go straight to questions.

Mr Chitham: Our preference is to make an opening statement, and it is our intention to do it in two parts. Part one I will speak to and part two, Ken Marsh will address. After that, we are open for questions and we hope that we will be able to ask you questions also in that question and answer period. The first thing I would like to do before the time clock starts is to ask you: are you aware of and have seen the previous submissions made by the RCB group to the government?

CHAIR: In terms of Rifle Company Butterworth, yes.

Mr Chitham: My understanding is that you might not have seen the second one dated 18 August 2010.

CHAIR: No, we have not seen that one yet.

Mr Chitham: The criticality of this is that this is a direct response to the government's refusal for the first submission on the basis that it did not cover a special act, the 1962 special operations act. This submission responds to that and again reiterates why we believe that the service is required for warlike. I am happy to give you that, but I have also sent an electronic copy of that to James so that you get it electronically. This is a very important document because it directly answers the request from the government.

CHAIR: We have that in electronic form, do we? If we can receive it electronically then we will accept it as a submission.

Mr Chitham: I will be making comment about that in my overview, but the detail is in this document, and it is critical. The other thing I would just like to mention is the service of the people that are here and their relationship to Rifle Company Butterworth. I was the commanding officer of the 8th/9th Battalion in the period 1974-76. In that time as the commanding officer, two of my rifle companies were deployed to Butterworth. Personally, I had no service at Butterworth myself.

Mr Cross: However, you were there for the first emergency.

Mr Chitham: The other thing is that my service was also war service in the first Malayan emergency. I was the returning commander. I was there for two years and operated against the communist terrorists. We operated on the Malay-Thailand border. We were fully aware of Butterworth existing at the same time and, importantly, our families were living on Penang Island during that emergency.

Mr Cross: I did three tours of duty in Butterworth—1973, 1974, 1975 and 1982 as well.

Mr Hannaford: I served there as a young soldier, a machine gunner, in 1974-75—one tour.

Mr Stone: My service started in 1974 at Butterworth. As I said, I would like to offer some relativity to you. I notice that in your meetings with the representative from Defence you asked a question about comparison between Butterworth and Timor. I also served in Timor. In fact, I have been 29 times to Timor; I have served there operationally nine times. Definitely, the service that I had in Butterworth in 1974-75 was absolutely comparable to the service of the Air Force defence guards at Comoro Airport throughout that period. Throughout my infantry service, I went on to be a lieutenant colonel. I had eight years at lieutenant colonel. I commanded a peacekeeping force in the Iran-Iraq war. I commanded the Army response to the Fiji coup in 1987 and, since becoming a chaplain, I have served again back in Timor numerous times, the Solomons nine times, and Bougainville as a peacekeeping operation, as well as several humanitarian sets of operations. Specifically too, also as a lieutenant colonel, when I came back from the Iran-Iraq war, I was asked to be the Army lieutenant colonel in the ADF command centre, so I was responsible for deploying the contingents that we sent to Cambodia, to Operation Desert Storm and to the western Sahara. Prior to that, as a lieutenant colonel, I had been in charge of infantry operations in Army headquarters, so I have an understanding of what happens at Defence. I understand how people write briefs. Junior officers write briefs to ministers who see them very quickly and pass them on and trust that they have received the information in good faith. Certainly, as I have read so many of the documents about Butterworth, I am astounded that the information that has been provided has been lacking in fact—some of it because, as our evidence will demonstrate, the evidence was top secret and classified at the time.

The bottom line for me is that in 1974-75 in Butterworth, every night, we deployed armed patrols—with weapons and with rules of engagement—who would have taken offensive action and killed people without any further orders every night of our operation. It was a warlike operation. I, as a platoon commander, felt grave responsibility that our soldiers were doing that every night. We knew from intelligence briefings we got weekly that there were communist terrorists throughout the area, within kilometres of the Butterworth Air Base. It was a warlike operation.

Mr Marsh: My experience is different. I was in the Air Force. I went there in September 1971. I was an LAC at the time, which is a junior rank in the Air Force. I was an aircraft tradesman, so I spent my time on aircraft flight lines with 75 Squadron. I came back to Australia in March of '74. I went back again in July '77 and came back in January of 1980. I was remote from the activity in that my role was not a security role. We were aware that there was something going on. I remember being warned about booby traps very early in 1971. I was told the Malaysian air force were flying sorties and dropping bombs in the jungle out there somewhere on the communists. Then in 1977, when I went back, I distinctly remember going through roadblocks in Butterworth itself and, from time to time, there were articles in the local newspapers about actions with the communist forces.

Mr Chitham: Sorry to interrupt, but you are getting involved in the detail and we really want to get an overview.

Mr Marsh: Okay; yes.

Mr Chitham: Our statement is to contend that the deployment was a strategic one to a specific area, Butterworth Air Base, for a specific task: Defence security. We believe that should have been gazetted to qualify for repatriation benefits under the Repatriation (Special Overseas Service) Act 1962. We will produce evidence to support that claim and will defend it against the Defence department's Nature of Service Branch counter-claim that it was the peace-time garrison duty and training with the Malaysian forces. We will show that because of the

government's political sensitivity, the RCB deployment was forcefully 'sold' to the Australian people as a training activity.

This subterfuge is exposed by the Malaysians themselves who were so heavily involved in the insurgency—which is known by some as the second emergency—that they could not train with the RCB. We will show that the warlike service criteria has been met by the RCB deployment and, in so doing, point out the errors of fact and the omissions of fact in the failure of the Nature of Service committee to consider all of the relevant and discoverable facts.

The specific task for RCB was under the Five Power Defence Arrangement, and it was to protect the RAAF assets. The assets included the two Mirage squadrons, the Integrated Air Defence System, which was opened specifically on 11 February 1971, and personnel deployed against a known and present enemy—communist terrorists who were supported by China and Vietnam. Our deployment was used as a deterrent force to a potential regional enemy. You can understand that, at that time, the enemy was China, who was sponsoring communist insurgency. You would need to understand the environment existing in South-East Asia and Malaysia's sensitivity to it within which Rifle Company Butterworth was deployed. We are looking back to the 1960s and 1970.

In the second document, which you now have a copy of, you will see a very strong treatise about the strategic issues since the end of the Second World War. You will see all of the agreements. The Five Power Defence Arrangements are at the tail end of it all. We are talking about SEATO, about ANZAC, about ANZUS, and that is something you could certainly have a look at. In that time communist expansion was rife. You may have heard of the domino theory—one falls, we will all fall. That was the mood of security within the South-East Asian area. You might recall Indonesian confrontation had occurred—Malaysia and Indonesia. There was the UK decision to withdraw from the Far East, which had a massive impact on the Malays and Singaporeans. Finally, there was the formation of the Five Power Defence Arrangements, which included Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Singapore and Malaysia.

The Malaysian environment itself: Malaya at that time had fought the second emergency. Australia was a major participant in supporting the Malays. The first Malayan emergency concluded in 1960. The second one, named by the Malays as the Insurgency War, commenced in 1968. It went on from there and finally concluded in 1989, with the surrender of Chin Peng. Chin Peng wrote a very good book about it all. There are also other books that have been written.

In Malaya the Malaysians were at war when we were deployed. They had in fact expanded their military forces to fight the war from one division to six divisions—a massive increase. So if anyone that says that the war was not a hot war, we would certainly contest that. They were unable to train with the RCB, and we have evidence of that from the Malays. The evidence simply says: 'We're fighting a war. We don't have time to train.' That certainly indicated their view about the training. Butterworth Air Base was a major support base for the royal Malayan armed forces. Why?—because it was very close to the major communist terrorist base, which was the Malay-Thailand border. The Malays used it themselves for offensive air strike operations and also offensive ground deployment operations into that area. It was a target not only for the CTs; it was also considered a target for any strategic enemy that might like to invade. The proof of that was that under the Five Power Defence Arrangements they decided they would establish an integrated air defence system, IADS, at Butterworth. That responsibility was given to the Australian RAAF. Here we have not only the strategic assets of two Mirage squadrons plus the IADS; there was a requirement to protect them with ground troops. That was the deployment of RCB. The then Prime Minister in 1969 made the announcement that that would be the basis for the deployment of RCB, and it was carried on.

You also have to remember the Australian political environment at the time. You would recall that the Vietnam War was running and that there were anti-Australian moratorium marches and other things occurring in the early 1970s. You will recall that the defence policy of the then Labor opposition party was to cease the war with the Vietnamese, to stop conscription and also to return all forward operational combat units from overseas, under the defence strategy Forward Defence, back to Australia to what they called Fortress Australia. We all came back. When the government changed in December 1972, it was immediately implemented.

Interestingly, Rifle Company Butterworth was deployed from our battalion that was in Singapore. So, with the withdrawal of the troops back to Australia under the government's policy, why did they send a company from Australia to the RCB? The fact that we were deployed there in a security role, a strategic security role, would certainly indicate that that caused some sensitivity with the government. We certainly have evidence to prove this, and this is from the defence committee itself. They use such words as, 'We will deploy this Rifle Company Butterworth from Australia and we will sell it to the public as a training activity.' So, with all of that sensitivity, the RCB was deployed. We have got the details of the words that they would use. And incidentally, at this

meeting, these were the people that were present for the defence committee: Secretary to the Department of Defence, Secretary to the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Secretary to the Department of Foreign Affairs, a representative of the Secretary of the Treasury, the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, and the three service chiefs. The words that were used, minuted in that particular meeting, were these: 'When the Australian battalion is withdrawn, the requirement for a company for security duties will be met by providing the unit on rotation from Australia.' This could be presented publicly as a training purpose, and it was. That was a deception.

During my command as the CO of the 8th/9th Battalion, two of my rifle companies were deployed to Butterworth. There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that this was an operational deployment to a warlike environment. The war was already there and we were going to a base that was already being used as an operational forward base—so it was a target. The other thing about it is this: because the force was deployed under the command of Headquarters Field Force Command, and it issued the mounting instruction, the instruction was not given to me as the battalion commander to provide a company to go and do peacetime training, or some form of guard duty; it was actually detached. Now to detach a unit—a combat sub-unit—to a major headquarters indicates there is more afoot than just going for garrison duties. The thing about the mounting instructions is—and when you read them you will see it—they state the role: security; and the type of force: the infantry company. Why would it be an infantry company? Why couldn't the RAAF provide their own security forces? An infantry company is a fighting unit. The command structure putting it under the Headquarters Field Force Command is not questionable; the fact they did it—you have got to ask the question why.

The requirement for the troops to be DP1 status—DP1 status really means you have got to be fit for fighting overseas service. The RCB had to have the same DP1 status as the troops that went to Vietnam. Interestingly, the other thing about DP1 status is that you had to complete a will, and that will had to be registered with the battalion headquarters—so that if something did happen to you there was the record, already there. So I ask you the question: if they were going for simple Australia-type peace garrison duties, why would they require you to have your DP1 status? Why would they have you do your will?

By direction—and we have got the documents to show this—there was to be no publicity given to the deployment, and if it was, it was to be for training purposes only. The other thing about this is that there was a pre-deployment intelligence briefing session. The other aspect about it was, because of the activity that we were going to be involved in in RCB—security, which meant defence—that meant that you had to have plans. And those plans were counter-penetration, so if an enemy force gets in, you stop the penetration; and the other aspect was you attack it and destroy it and remove it. The other thing about the deployment to RCB was that it also had contingency plans to evacuate the Australian families from Penang Island back to Butterworth, for extraction back to Australia.

Now all of those facts do not lead one to conclude that the task was a peacetime garrison duty similar to the duty in Australia, nor that the training with the MAF was possible. The deception will be relieved by the evidence and facts we have submitted. To add to that deception, we ask ourselves the question: why didn't the government seek to prescribe the specific area, Butterworth Air Base, or to allot the personnel for special duty there, to be gazetted to the Governor-General—thereby disqualifying them from the repatriation benefits under the Repatriation (Special Overseas Service) Act?

That is my statement. I now ask Ken to top it up, with the evidence of action at Butterworth.

Mr Marsh: Thank you, members of the committee, for the opportunity to address you. I will first provide a brief overview of the legal provisions relevant to the claim for warlike service recognition at Butterworth and then comment on the situation at the time. My comments on the legal provisions are based on two reports: Justice Mohr's 2000 report *Review of service entitlement anomalies in respect of South-East Asian service 1955-1975* and the 2003 *Report of the Review of Veterans Entitlements*, at chapters 11, 13 and 14, which was chaired by Justice Clarke. The warlike service criteria, which were approved by cabinet in 1993, are a refinement of the incurred danger test that has applied since pre-World War II years. They say, essentially, that a veteran is entitled to a service pension and associated repatriation benefits if he or she has incurred danger from the hostile forces of an enemy. That is in essence what those of us who served at Butterworth during the insurgency are requesting.

Briefly, Justice Mohr says that the test is satisfied if the veteran faces an objective danger. That was in response to legal case where a Mr Thompson, if my memory is correct, submitted a claim that he had incurred danger. The fact was that the danger was some hundreds of kilometres away, so Mohr saw the importance of differentiating between a subjective and an objective danger. Mohr said that an objective danger occurs if an armed enemy is shown to have been present or—he did not let it rest there—if the troops are told by their commanders that they will face danger from an enemy—then to them it is an objective danger. At all times, says Mohr, the test is

objective. It does not matter if the threat was perceived or not perceived at the time. What matters is the real state of affairs on the ground and the warnings given by commanders.

After considering the comments of Mohr, Justice Clarke concluded that if military authorities considered a place vulnerable to attack and sent forces to that place they were putting those forces in harm's way. That is, those forces faced an objective danger. Clarke said that that fact was not changed by what a historian might find after the event about what the enemy's intentions were at the time. This means that when hard evidence shows the true situation at the time, subjective and retrospective statements like 'Butterworth was an idyllic posting,' or 'Nothing happened,' must be dismissed. Defence maintains retrospective claims for service classification are assessed against the criteria applying when the service was rendered. Clarke used 'warlike' and 'non-warlike' criteria to review service prior to 1993. His test for warlike service was:

- the mission was to pursue specific military objective;
- the application of force was authorised; and
- the operational threat was such that there was an expectation of battle casualties.

One reason for adopting these criteria was to avoid inconsistencies that had occurred under the previous criteria. One source of inconsistency Clarke identified was attempts to add descriptors such as 'imminent' or 'immediate' to danger. He believed this was outside the spirit of the legislation, concluding that the test was satisfied if a veteran could show that he was sent to a place:

... where injury from hostile action was conceivable and might reasonably have been regarded as an existing risk, this is irrespective of proof whether the enemy at that particular time was or was not capable of inflicting injury at that spot.

Defence attempted to downplay conditions at Butterworth, claiming that the risk was low. Mohr in 2000 found warlike conditions existed at Ubon, Thailand, post June 1965, although the Defence committee considered the probability of enemy air attacks would be slight. It is also clear that Mohr's consideration of the facts surrounding the Far Eastern Strategic Reserve recognise that many of those granted qualifying or warlike service during the Malayan Emergency faced little risk from the enemy.

Now to the situation on the ground at Butterworth. The evidence is sourced from documents one would expect are readily accessible to Defence. In fact, much of the evidence is taken from documents cited by them, which they choose to ignore. The 1968 to 1989 insurgency war has been described as a serious security threat that require the combined efforts and resources of the Malaysian, Thai and Singaporean governments to resolve. By 1975 there had been attacks on security forces installations—military and police—across the country and high-profile attacks and assassinations in urban areas. Threat assessments concluded that Butterworth could come under attack at any time without warning from communist elements active in the area. Concerns over the possibility of rocket and mortar attacks saw increased patrolling and aircraft dispersal. Defence cites CO base squadron reports to prove there was no defence emergency. While they state the ground defence operations centre, or GDOC, was exercised on a regular basis, especially during air defence exercises and simulation of a declared emergency, they ignore the fact that reports for the period January 1976 to September 1978 at least—they are the only ones we have sourced—show that the GDOC was regularly manned in response to possible ground threats. Defence also ignores high-level documents, which Ted has alluded to previously, that demonstrate that the real reason for the presence of the Australian rifle company was to provide a quick reaction force under the cover of training, owing to the political sensitivities of the time. Rather, Defence relies on lower level documents in an effort to maintain that the company was at Butterworth primarily for training.

Clearly, there existed at the time a real expectation that Butterworth could come under attack. There existed an objective danger created by the presence of communist forces. Therefore, to cite Clarke, forces at Butterworth were placed in harm's way. To reiterate, Clarke applied the following criteria to determine warlike service:

- the mission was to pursue specific military objective;
- the application of force was authorised; and
- the operational threat was such that there was an expectation of battle casualties.

Consider these in relation to Butterworth. Australian security personnel at Butterworth were employed to defend Australian personnel and assets. The Mirage squadrons were based at Butterworth to provide air defence for Malaysia and Singapore. Those are two specific military objectives. Rules of engagement authorised the use of lethal force. Claims that these rules of engagement were defensive only are irrelevant. On Mohr's decision regarding Ubon, which I mentioned previously, airfield defence guards at Ubon were employed on defensive duties and the RAAF role in Thailand remained defensive. It must also be noted that the Butterworth airbase belonged to Malaysia and the rifle company and RAAF personnel employed on security duties shared responsibilities with Malaysian forces for the defence of vital points and shared facilities, such as the air traffic

control tower, fuel farm, ordnance, stores and water supply. These were essential to both nations in order to meet their respective military objectives. Australian forces were helping their Malaysian allies defend Malaysian assets from Malaysia's armed enemies, which were active in the vicinity.

Given the expectations at the time, if casualties had occurred as a result of an enemy attack it could not have been argued after the incident that these casualties were not expected. The expectation was that an attack could take place and that injuries from an attack were also a reasonable expectation. Until such time as service at Butterworth is properly recognised as warlike Butterworth veterans remain treated unfairly really regard to qualifying service and access to repatriation benefits in comparison with others with like service. I will pass back to Ted and thank you for your attention.

Mr Chitham: Thank you, Chair. That is our statement. We are open for questions.

CHAIR: Thank you, very much, for your evidence. You will understand that the petitions committee is obviously focused on the issue of petitioning. As I said at the outset, we cannot advocate on your behalf or take a position. The committee understands that you have been advocating on this issue for a number of years. Could you tell us, briefly, what led you to petition the House on the matter and how the petitioning process has compared with other means of advocacy that you have undertaken on the issue.

Mr Hannaford: We have had a lot of knock-backs over the years. We have been fighting this for 20 years. I had a yarn to one of our partners from the review team in Adelaide, Mike Dennis, and he suggested we petition the government. We ended up with 5,000 signatures—only 2,000 were presentable all the rest were not neat enough. We tried to get away from the letter writing and the usual knock-back. We hit the Labor government with the petition and we would wait for a Liberal to come in and would do the same. It was going round and round in circles getting nowhere. Then Ted came on board with us and Gary as a bit of extra weight. When we saw Ubon had a win, as we had virtually the same case, which was not mentioned the other day with Stuart Robert, we said, 'Right, let's try a petition to kick something different off,' and this is where we are.

Mr Chitham: It is very important to understand that the first submission we made was to the then coalition government. You will see the dates. In 2007, the then minister for veterans affairs actually made a decision about two months before the actual election. He gave to the RCB group the classification of services as 'hazardous'. The new government came in, nothing happened. We asked the new government had they drawn up the instruments to implement that decision and the answer was basically, 'No, you have fallen through the cracks.' They did not use those terms but basically that is what they were telling us.

We then asked them if they would carry it forward. It may have been David Feeney who was the person who responded to was. He then said, 'We have had another review,'—still by the same nature of service branch and still by the head of the nature of service branch, a fellow called David Webster. The answer came back and said, 'We do not think it is a hazardous service either; it is peacetime service.' So that then started us going: well, let's approach this in a more professional way. We did that. For the documents we have presented, we have a professional research team we use so we are not coming from the view that was stated by someone in the nature of service branch that we are a couple of diggers or a couple of corporal's making their voices heard. It is bigger than that. This is the Royal Australian Regiment. There were 9,000 of us that were deployed there. The regiment is a very strong association. You will have seen the letter that the chairman of the board of the RAR corporation has sent to Darren Chester.

CHAIR: How have you found that process compared with the other mechanisms that you have used?

Mr Chitham: What we have found is a tardiness with our submissions to the Department of Defence. Robert was the man that was seeking the freedom-of-information access to documents. Would you like to make a comment?

Mr Cross: No, not particularly.

Mr Chitham: In some of these very important documents we received, clauses were withdrawn that we could not look at because of some secrecy. I am referring to documents that under the secrecy act we should have access to. That did not occur. They were slow. It was almost like they using the tactic of keeping us on a string. So it was very difficult but we persisted and that persistence has brought us to the decision, as Stan told you, to submit a petition.

CHAIR: How have you found the petitioning process?

Mr Chitham: Very good.

Mr Hannaford: We were very impressed.

CHAIR: Engaging with communities when collecting signatures for a petition can be an important part of the petitioning process. Could you tell us your experience and interactions while gathering signatures.

Mr Hannaford: We got a lot of interest from people who were not too sure. They knew about the Rifle Company Butterworth and the wars that had happened since the 70s but when we explained what happened, they said, 'This is not right. You blokes should get recognition. I will sign that, no problem.' It was great. Our own members came on side too.

Mr Chitham: In another life, I have also been involved in petitioning through the Senate. The Senate is good because it has electronic petitions. I have also spoken to whoever looks after the administration of your petitions committee and was told that there has been a decision by the House of Representatives to introduce an electronic petitioning system but it has not been advanced so I would say that the problem is it is labour-intensive to go around and get these signatures whereas an electronic submission is ideal. If you look at the change.org organisations of the world, you are able to get access to the public much easier.

CHAIR: Now that a government response to your petition has been received, would you like to take this opportunity to reflect on your experience of the petitions process and share any suggestions as to how it may be improved. You have already given one example in electronic petitions. Are there any recommendations you would have in how the petitions process could be improved?

Mr Chitham: I have got one recommendation: because the petition was on an issue that related to the Department of Defence, all of our submissions have gone through to the Department of Defence. Obviously they have gone to that particular appropriate persons to be able to investigate it. That process is like the arsonist being the fireman. So there has been delay. Our attempts to try and come in through the individual process of going to a parliamentarian and asking him or her to do something about it seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

We are locked in to making the submission to a particular department that can forestall us in whatever way it wants. In our case, our submission goes to the secretary of the Department of Defence. It then gets allocated out. The one thing that we were not sure of was: what is the process between the secretary of the Department of Defence and coming into your committee? In our particular case with all this documentation, why was that flow of information not given to you? You are sitting here now with only half information. The other aspect of this is that the responses that we have always had to our submissions from the Department of Defence have been very selective to the extent that they have used data or facts that support the rejection without looking at the totality. It is almost like lying by omission.

CHAIR: As I said at the beginning, the process is that the committee itself is not involved in the particulars of a petition. We are just involved in the process of fundamentally ensuring that petitions are in order as far as standing orders are concerned and making sure that that is then communicated to the minister and responses are received back from the minister. In terms of the detail of what is going on behind the scenes with the ministers' departments and so on, the committee is not directly involved.

Mr Chitham: Thank you for that.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Following on from that, for future submissions and for the benefit of *Hansard*, is to make a sweeping assumption that when preparing a petition to the committee and they have got no access to any other information and simply duplicate the information that you have and provide it where applicable with the petition. I do want to reiterate the very over-reaching broad comments that our chair has alluded to where the reach of this committee is and stress that the instrument of the Petitions Committee can be useful as a vehicle of raising the level of awareness for a particular issue. It definitely can be seen as a vehicle or an instrument with which to bring the attention of an issue to the parliament. Each of the petitions are tabled in the parliament by our chair and members of the committee are given the opportunity to speak to it if they so wish in the parliament.

We have received around 100 petitions this year. I am mindful not to stray into the issues that I desperately want to ask questions about. I will take the chair's guidance. Given that in our last petitions committee we took evidence from Minister Robert and a number of witnesses, I would suggest that the part of the conversation pertaining to that would allow me scope to ask questions of witnesses around that.

It would appear I know nothing of the Butterworth situation. But I want to try and get my head around the core of your issue. The department is making a claim that the situation was not warlike and you are claiming that it was. In your earlier evidence we heard from Ken Marsh previous judgements from Justices Moore and Clarke. I would not suggest to Mr Marsh that that was a conclusive argument. Can you please help me understand better where that definition exists? I got the first point that there was a conspiracy as to the reasoning for the original deployment and the motivations. I do not know if it is the argument you have hung your coat on. You are not to

take advice from me on how to structure your argument. Please take me to another place that I have not heard yet from your evidence.

Mr Chitham: The criteria is that which has been accepted by the government, accepted by the Department of Defence and applied by the nature of service branch of the Department of Defence. So any submission you make has to prove that criteria existed, and all of our evidence shows that it has. You can pick it up when you look at that first document where we make references to the actual mounting instructions issued by field force command headquarters and also instructions from the RAAF base themselves that show that we were briefed in a way that there was a threat. We were there in an area that was that war and we serving alongside the Malays. So all of the facts that we presented are there in those submissions. I cannot help you any more than that.

Mr Hannaford: The criteria are everywhere: the rules of engagement, expectation of casualties. We met all the criteria. We would not go there in peace time without those criteria.

Mr Marsh: The criteria for warlike and non-warlike service was approved by the cabinet at the time in 1993, if my memory is correct. It is against those criteria that we believe this evidence should be assessed. As I tried to explain, the criteria are determined by what the facts were at the time. It is not a retrospective assessment; it is a prospective assessment—that is the spirit of the legislation.

From my perspective, I see what Defence put in their documents. They put information in there but they never seem to me to actually answer the questions: were the rules of engagement? Was there an armed threat? Was there an expectation of casualties? They tried to downplay that more by looking backwards and, as has been said, by selective use of documents.

My frustration with the process it is that it seems to be that the Department of Defence, as the arbitrator of all this, means that we keep going to them and they keep coming back with the same response that there are certain documents which we see as key documents which they fail to address. If there is no way that they can be forced to address those key documents, which we believe are important, we just keep hitting a brick wall.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Mr Marsh, you made three points in your earlier commentary. The last of the three points alluded to suspected casualty. Can you advise the committee, in strengthening your claim that it was a warlike environment, as to what the causalities were that the Australian forces all through the regiment actually experienced.

Mr Marsh: I am not sure that any casualties actually resulted from any activity of an enemy. But if we look at the threat assessments at the time they say things like 'an attack could come at any time of the type that could injure personnel and damage equipment'. So if there was an enemy and there was an expectation that an attack could take place at any time, then by pure logic there has to be an expectation that the attack would bring with it the expectation of a casualty. I think that is the point. They show that there was definitely a risk from different forms of attack. [inaudible] with the guerrilla warfare.

Mr Cross: According to the Malay's book, the Malaysian armies battled against communist insurgency in peninsula Malaysia from 1968 to 1989. One hundred and fifty-five servicemen were killed, 854 servicemen—this is Malays—were wounded in action.

Mr Chitham: Can I just explain it this way: remember the task was specific to the security of the Butterworth air base. The confines of the area were inside the fence. You will see in the agreement with the Malaysian government that we were not allowed to go outside of the base. We were required to defend it internal. We had the company there to do that, and it patrolled. The whole thing was that there was no penetration into the base, which brings into account the question of deterrence of any strategic force. You put a force there to either fight what is going to happen, or it deters a fight. That is the nature of any strategic deployment. In this particular case there was no penetration into the base—none whatsoever. But we found evidence that there was an attempt at an incursion into the base—cut fences and other things.

Mr Cross: Plus there were numerous incidents right around the outside of the base. I will give you a couple of examples. On 24 September 1975 a rocket attack occurred on the Malay base at Sungai Petani, which is just up the road from Butterworth. It was stated that Alor Setar or Butterworth could be the next location. On 11 May 1973, the communists blew up two bridges in province Wellesley, where Butterworth is located. On 31 March 1975, five Malaysian bases are attacked by rockets, including one on Penang Island, which is just across the road from Butterworth. On 27 April 1976, CTs shoot down a Malaysian helicopter, killing 11 servicemen.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: So there was plenty of action.

CHAIR: I would point out that the advice you were given, Mr Buchholz, as far as providing other evidence to the committee, apart from the petition itself, is not correct. I just want to ensure, for *Hansard*, and for anyone who

might be listening, that that extra evidence cannot be given to the committee itself. We just deal specifically with the petition.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Thank you, Chair. And I do ask for your guidance at all times during these procedures.

Mrs PRENTICE: My first question is to you, Chair. What is the next step for these gentlemen with the additional information they have. Do they need to forward that to the minister?

CHAIR: Obviously, that would be the best means that they could go about it immediately.

Mrs PRENTICE: So they basically need to start again with their information.

Mr Chitham: That has already been done. He has the information. His whole department has—

CHAIR: The slightest information that you have presented, too.

Mr Chitham: That has been there since 2010. This is the concern we have.

CHAIR: If I am correct, I think Mrs Prentice is asking specifically about your response to the evidence that the minister and the Department of Defence provided to this committee a few weeks ago.

Mr Chitham: I ask Mr Marsh to speak on that, because he has actually sent that letter of concern. Can you just very quickly say what it was you did and what response you have got, if any?

Mr Marsh: I actually rang to try to speak to the Minister Robert. I will just have to open up an email here to find the specific date. I rang to try and speak to Senator Robert. I spoke to Jo Hanrahan in his department, who I believe is one of his advisers or assistants. I said that I believe that the minister had inadvertently provided a misleading report to do Petitions Committee and asked her to look at that information. I sent the information through. She said she would pass it over to the Nature of Service Branch. I said, 'Please, get the minister to look at it before you send it to the Nature of Service Branch.' I tried to say that to her a couple of times. I sent a series of five emails with some of the evidence in it, plus attachments. Whether the minister saw that or whether it was sent directly to NOSB, I do not know. But about five weeks later I got a letter back from the minister saying that he was satisfied that what the NOSB had provided was an accurate and fair assessment of the facts.

Mrs PRENTICE: This is completely different, but Mr Stone—just to put it in context for me—mentioned that he had served both Butterworth and Bougainville. I know that Bougainville was a very volatile situation. How would you compare these two?

Mr Stone: It is a different comparison, obviously. In Bougainville, we were unarmed and there was a peace monitoring force. Essentially, a peace agreement was in process, which was eventually set and ratified. It was a very different situation.

Mrs PRENTICE: So it was much safer in Bougainville?

Mr Stone: Everyone was unarmed. It was definitely much safer in Bougainville. In Butterworth, every night it was the soldiers patrolling around with live ammunition and expecting contact at any possible time.

Mr HOGAN: Gentleman, I just want to make a comment. As the chair has said, it is not for us—unfortunately, in some ways—to pass comment on what you have just said, as much as personally I would like to pass a few comments. I want to thank you for the submission and what you have done with this. We believe in the Standing Committee on Petitions that the committee is a really important part of our process of good government. I want to commend you for how you have done this and for your support for your petition today. It has been of much interest to me and I want to thank you for your time, how you have gone about this and for your suggestions for how we can improve our process. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your participation today. If the committee has further questions for you, the secretariat will contact you. Thank you very much for providing your evidence today

Mr Chitham: Just one point I would like to make: our researcher has consolidated every piece of information that has been put together from us to the government and to the Department of Defence. That is now consolidated and we are happy to share that with the committee if you so desire.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

McGrady, The Hon. Tony, Mayor, Mount Isa City Council

[11:02]

Zone-A Tax Offset

CHAIR: I now invite The Hon. Tony McCredie to discuss his petition on the zone A tax offset. I remind you, as I do all witnesses, that although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and, therefore, has the same standing as proceedings of the chambers themselves. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and will attract parliamentary privilege. You may make a brief opening statement or we can go straight to questions. Hopefully you can keep the opening statement to about 15 minutes, so that members have the opportunity to ask questions. You will understand we are on a bit of tight schedule.

Councillor McGrady: Mr Chairman and members of the House of Representatives, first of all, thanks for the invitation to come along here today to elaborate on this petition. I have been involved in this issue for many years. We organised a petition back when Peter Costello was the federal Treasurer, and I presented that to him while he was in Longreach. We have had discussion with Warren Truss and most other people. I attended the Windsor committee, which was set up to look at fly-in fly-out but also covered zone allowances. Every opportunity we get, we address parliamentarians on the issue.

Not too many people in the country understand or realise what the zone allowance is, whether or not it exists, and the reasons why it was implemented. It was implemented after the Second World War by, I think, the Chifley government. The purpose of the zone allowance was to break the nation up into four areas, basically to give incentives or compensation to people living in remote parts of the country, but also to give incentives to people to come and live there.

As an example, I came to live in Mount Isa in 1963. At that time, the basic wage in Queensland was about 16 pounds a week. In Mount Isa, it was double that. The zone allowance was worth 260 pounds, or \$520, a year. So when you compare the wage to the zone allowance, it was an incentive. It was a huge carrot to attract people to come, not just to the Mount Isas of the world but to the remoter communities as well.

One of the problems was that this was never indexed. So today it is not worth anything. The point we make is that governments, regardless of the political persuasion, have to make a decision: do you want the population of the nation to be based along the coastal strip or in the large regional centres or do you want the inland country to be denuded? If you want to pay lip-service to the ideals of decentralisation, if governments really want to decentralise this nation, there have to be some incentives. The zone allowance in our opinion is that incentive.

So, if you have a young teacher or a young professional person who currently lives in Sydney or Brisbane, then they get this economic carrot in front of them. The chances of them moving into the Mount Isas, the Cloncurrys, or the Boulurias of this world, together with their partners—their wives or husbands; they can come out to these places; they can save; they can either buy a house and raise their family in the remote parts of the nation, or after a number of years, they can move on.

Currently, when Public Servants come to these places, it is seen still today as a sentence. They do their country stint and then they rush back to the coast. What we are saying is that, if you have a genuine incentive for people to come, you do a number of things: you create a population in the inland; you take the massive population away from the coasts, and with it all the problems associated with large communities.

Another of the aspects of our petition relates to the current huge debate taking place about the merits or otherwise of fly-in fly-out. The Windsor report asked the question: 'is this the cancer of the bush'? In my opinion, it is. I see on a daily basis communities being destroyed; I see P&Cs winding up; I see Lions Clubs closing down; I see Rotary Clubs amalgamating—because the people who fly-in fly-out, with all due respect to them, have no appreciation, no interest, in the local community and so some of those communities are dying.

But, with the current zone allowance, by virtue of the fact that you are physically working in area A, you qualify for the zone allowance. So you could be living in St Lucia or you could be living on the Gold Coast, and you fly in to a mining operation and you get the benefits of the people who live there. So, in our petition, we ask that, if there is going to be an amendment to the zone allowance, it apply to people who live in these areas and not to the fly-in fly-outs.

That is basically where we are coming from. I commend the current federal government for the emphasis they are placing on Northern Australia. It was an election commitment. In fairness to the coalition, I think they have honoured that commitment. They have put the whole question of northern development high on the political agenda. From where I come from, that must be a plus. I have had discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister. He

assured me that the question of zone allowance would feature in the green paper and then obviously in the white paper.

So all the moves are there. The politicians are saying the right words. But I am concerned that, with the massive amounts of recommendations which will be coming forward, the zone allowance will be lost. Again, I reiterate: the zone allowance is the big carrot which will attract people to come and live in the remote areas. I do not mean just the Mount Isas, also those small places that are fighting for teachers, doctors, nurses and other professionals and others. I just think that this is the way to do it. I would be more than happy to elaborate on my petition.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that evidence. First of all, could you please tell us about the history of the petition? What led you to petition the House for the zone tax offset? Have you also engaged in other forms of advocacy, such as writing to ministers?

Councillor McGrady: I organised a large petition, as I mentioned in my evidence, when Peter Costello was the federal Treasurer. When I start these petitions, I involve the Northern Territory and parts of Western Australia and I try to make it a national petition. To me, when you are talking about the development of the north or you are talking about the development of inland Australia, you cannot just come to governments asking for money. That is one of the sad things about political life today. People come in and all they want is for them to pay. What we are saying is that this is a major issue. It is not about putting a hand out for money; it is about trying to address a major issue which I see on a daily basis, and that is the shortage of professional people in small communities. How are we going to address it? Then I come here and I see all of the social problems of big cities. When you talk to people and you suggest, 'Why don't you go and live in other places? It's a good lifestyle. There is the education system and the health system. They are all improving.' I believe that the zone allowance is the one which will be the big carrot to address this imbalance which currently, I believe, exists in the country today.

CHAIR: Thank you. I go to engaging with communities. Obviously, being the mayor of a town, you would know a fair bit about that. Collecting signatures on an issue can be an important part of the petitions process. What kinds of challenges did you face with gathering signatures in the remote communities of northern Australia? Could you tell us about your experiences and interactions while gathering those signatures?

Councillor McGrady: When you have a petition such as this, where there is genuine support for the concept of the petition, people just say, 'Are we wasting our time?' There is scepticism today about whether governments—whether they be local, state or federal—actually listen to what people are saying. The only concerns that have ever been raised with me on this particular petition are: 'While it is uniform support, is it worthwhile?'; 'It has happened before. They are not going to listen.' That is the reason why I have taken every opportunity to go to the Windsor committee. One of your committees came to Mount Isa 12 months ago. I went along and I addressed them. Every opportunity I get to elaborate on this, I do so. The greatest chance we have of getting some movement in the zone allowance is contained in this white paper, which the federal government are working on now and which I applaud.

CHAIR: In your opinion, what effect does the current approach to remote tax offsets have on remote communities? You have already explored some of them.

Councillor McGrady: The reality is that they are not worth two bob. I explained before that, when I first arrived here back in 1963, if you were earning, say, 30 pounds a week—and you can earn 260 pounds a year tax free—at the end of the financial year there was a big cheque waiting for you. That was the incentive to stay. That is why in the early 60s you had two major developments: the Snowy Mountains scheme and Mount Isa Mines. The cream of the youth went to work in both of those centres because of the incentives there. Mount Isa is my home and has been for 50 years. I have seen people come and stay. Because of government decisions, like improving education and improving health, people stay. But there is still a large exodus, particularly with the young professional people. My point is that, if we were to offer those people some incentive, such as zone allowance, you would get them to stay.

Mount Isa is different to a very small place like Camooweal and the really outback places in the Northern Territory. By virtue of the fact that we have a fairly large population compared to the others, governments are prepared to spend money on good education. I claim that the education system in my city is as good as anywhere in Queensland. Our health facilities are as good as anywhere in Queensland, but that is because of our numbers. What I am suggesting is that we have this zone allowance. You get more and more people moving, but more important than moving is actually staying there. In these tiny places, if one family leaves the community, sometimes it means that they are going to lose a teacher, a police officer or a nurse. That is the reason why governments of all persuasions have to ask themselves the question and make a decision: do you want to continue

to denude outback and regional Queensland, or do you want to give incentives to encourage people to come and live there?

Mr HOGAN: As I made the comment before, I want to thank you for going through this process as well. As members of the Standing Committee on Petitions, we view it as a valuable tool to be used within our process, so I applaud you on that. As you know, we are not to pass comment on your petition itself but more on the process and improvements, if you like, to the process of what we could do. I will just make one brief comment, with the chair's indulgence: as a member for a regional electorate, let me at least say that I very much understand your point, and I will leave it at that.

CHAIR: No questions?

Mrs PRENTICE: No. I agree with Tony about the issue.

Councillor McGrady: My daughter is one of your constituents.

Mrs PRENTICE: I do not know that she votes for me, though, Tony. We need to delete that. She is a friend of mine. We are friends.

Councillor McGrady: She is a good friend of Dr Emerson too.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: I also share the complimentary nature of committee colleagues about the endeavour of your pursuing zonal taxation. Being from a regional seat myself, I have seen the open advocacy across many different factors for this. I just want to reiterate the chair's opening comments about the definition of this committee. Whilst we are not asked to sit in judgement on the contents other than the mechanism of how you found the delivery, have you done any modelling on what the cost of zonal taxation would be?

Councillor McGrady: We have done figures that, if the zone allowance had been indexed today, it would be worth about \$15,000 a year. In our petition we were asking to start off at \$10,000, but the issue is that we are not talking about people in Brisbane or Sydney or the large centres of population. The numbers of people we are talking about are very small compared to the population. Obviously we do not have facilities to work out what it would cost. I do place emphasis on the fact that the numbers of people who would benefit from this would be a lot smaller than for some incentive for Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne or wherever.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Thank you. I encourage you to stay dedicated to this cause. It is something that I believe that the state would be a major beneficiary of.

CHAIR: The ministerial response notes that the tax offset is under consideration as part of its white paper for the development of northern Australia. Are you satisfied with the response?

Councillor McGrady: I am satisfied. As I keep on mentioning, I have been working on this for many, many, many years. When at the last election the coalition promised to have a white paper, I thought that was a move in the right direction. I welcomed it, and I welcomed it publicly. I think what has happened now is that northern development is now high on the political agenda, and quite honestly I believe that, if this is ignored, based on some of the answers from Warren Truss and other people, it would be to the detriment of government. I think we have reached the stage now where we have had not commitments but certainly commitments to investigate. If you are going to genuinely start talking about advancing northern Australia and go as far as having a white paper and all the discussions that have already occurred, this is one area which has to be addressed, and I am confident that there will be some movement in this area.

CHAIR: Now that a government response to your petition has been received, would you like to take this opportunity to reflect on your experience of the petitions process and share any suggestions as to how it may be improved?

Councillor McGrady: Basically, I am happy with the process. The facts are that, as ordinary people, we can address our governments—whether they be state, local or federal, it does not matter—by way of a petition. I think the average person in the street understands what a petition is but there is scepticism out there—'Do they listen? It is just another petition that gets delivered.' Again, if we could get some results from this petition I think it would demonstrate to the public that it is not a waste of time, that they do listen and as a result of what we have done, we see movement in our issue.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your contribution today. If the committee has further questions for you, the secretariat will contact you.

Councillor McGrady: I thank you, Chair, for listening. While I understand the purposes of this committee, the facts are that we have four members of the House of Representatives here and you, particularly the side of the House you come from, do have an influence. Anything at all you can do as individual members of the House of Representatives to assist us in this would be very much appreciated.

CHAIR: Thank you very much.

JOHNSTON, Mr Colin Henry, Managing Director, Barnabas Fund Australia Limited

[11:24]

CHAIR: Unfortunately, the petitioner Mr Kadri, who was scheduled to speak on his petition on the Racial Discrimination Act at 11.30 am, now cannot appear due to an emergency. I welcome the next witness, Mr Johnston. I invite you to discuss your petition on Christians in Syria. I remind you, as I do all witnesses, that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and therefore has the same standing as the chambers themselves. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard, and will attract parliamentary privilege. You may make an opening statement, or we can go straight to questions.

Mr Johnston: I would like to make an opening statement. The petition that we are talking about was presented only in May this year. Based on the last petition we had a review of, that was a 12- to 18-month lag. We are very pleased that the committee is looking at Syria in such a short time frame, so I am pleased to be able to talk about it.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: It is the efficiency of this government, you see.

CHAIR: If you want to discuss the details of the petition, please go ahead.

Mr Johnston: Yes. We put this petition together two years ago, when the current crisis in Syria really got going. Barnabas Fund has been involved in Syria for many, many years. It has been working with the Christian church there and supplying aid programs to Christians for many years. Three years ago, the current escalation really started speeding up. It is public knowledge that many Christians were being persecuted; children were being killed; mothers being raped. Part of Barnabas's role, not just in Australia but also internationally, is to raise the awareness of persecution that goes on. I mean most of us in Western countries—and, if I talk about Australia, we really have no idea of what persecution is and, unless you have actually travelled overseas to some of these Third World countries, you do not realise how blessed a country we have in Australia.

Barnabas wants to be active in raising the awareness of governments about the plight of minorities, and mainly Christian minorities, who happen to be living in a country where the majority of the government is Islamic and Christians, because they are a minority—in Syria, less than 10 per cent of the population is Christian—they are persecuted. We believe it is our right, as fellow Christians, to raise the awareness of governments and say, 'Please, can governments provide aid'. You can imagine 450,000 Christians have actually left Syria in the last three years. The mechanics of that—it is very easy to say 'the mechanics'—are that you have to pack up and leave, take your children, take minimal personal and material possessions and just flee to get away from the rebels. It is a nightmare, and they need help. They need food; they need clothing—particularly in winter. It gets very cold over there, so they need blankets, heating, medical provisions—those sorts of things. So Barnabas wrote this petition in relation to Syria to raise awareness and certainly to raise the awareness of the department of foreign affairs about aid going into overseas countries and to ask if they could focus their attention on Syria because of the current plight there.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Can you tell us the history behind the petition and what led you to petition support for Syria's Christians. Now obviously you have addressed a little bit of that, but what led you to petition the House rather than other methods of advocacy? Have you also engaged in other forms of advocacy, such as writing to ministers?

Mr Johnston: Yes. First of all, when we have a problem like the crisis in Syria, the first thing that Barnabas does is make sure we get aid into them. That is the No. 1 thing. People need food to live; they need medical supplies. We take it for granted here in Australia, you know, that if you are a diabetic you can just go down and get your insulin and you are right. But over there, if they do not get their insulin they are going to die. If they do not get food they are going to die—water, so those sorts of things. Now because Barnabas has been involved with Syria for many, many years—about 16 years we have been in there—it has a relationship with the church leaders and so it already has a network set up for providing aid, food et cetera. So that is No. 1, getting aid. Secondly, what do we do about raising awareness? Certainly, we have always, where we can, raised awareness via petitions. I think this is about the fourth petition that Barnabas has done over the years. I have been involved with them since 2007.

We also encourage individuals to write to their local members. On our website are draft letters, standard letters, that we encourage supporters to write and send to their local representative. Those are the various things that we have done. In our head office in the UK, where the organisation was set up just 20 years ago, the founding director, Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, has a good relationship with key leaders over there. It is about influencing people and influencing leaders.

CHAIR: Your petition attracted a large number of signatures. Engaging with communities when collecting signatures for a petition can be an important part of the petitions process. Could you please tell us about how the signature-gathering was conducted for your petition? Also, could tell us about your experiences and interactions while gathering those signatures?

Mr Johnston: We have a mailing list—we have only been going in Australia since 2005; next year is our 10th anniversary—that is already up to 30,000 around Australia. When we do a mailing list we will include a focus on the petition and we will attach a petition sheet in the magazine, and then that goes out. That goes out to individuals and also to churches. We have a lot of churches around Australia supporting our organisation. I encourage the churches to put it in a place, promote it from the platform and encourage people to sign. When we send our magazine out to individuals, we encourage them to photocopy it and send it out to their friends—home group members et cetera. Plus, people do have the facility to download a copy from the website, print it off and then distribute it that way.

Part of my role as managing director is to deputise and go to churches and home groups that are currently not supporting Barnabas and raise awareness about what Barnabas does. Whenever I speak and promote a petition, I say, 'We're going to present this petition to parliament in 2015. I'll have it at the back of the room. Please, this is something that you can do as an individual. Often we in Australia think someone else will do it. Here is the perfect opportunity; it is sitting out there.' I just spoke at a Baptist church over at Clontarf two Sundays ago. I had a fantastic response. I got seven pages full of signatures. It is all about raising the awareness. Barnabas has a good network. We have a good network within churches. Churches will really promote it; they will encourage it with their members. That is how we raise the awareness; we get the petition signed.

CHAIR: Now that a government response to your petition has been received, would you like to take the opportunity to reflect on your experience of the petitions process and share any suggestions as to how it might be improved?

Mr Johnston: I must say, the petitions process, as I have found it when I have gone through it, works pretty well. I have already established a network of members of parliament who are Christians and will gladly speak for Barnabas. Luke Simpkins, who spoke for this one in Syria, has done several for us. When we are gathering a petition, I will ring around. I will ring Luke initially and say, 'Luke, we're doing a petition on Syria. Would you like to speak to parliament about it when it closes?' He has been very helpful. At Clontarf Beach Baptist, I met the local member for Petrie, Mr Howarth. He said he saw our petition there. He said, 'You know I can't sign it.' I said, 'That's fine.' He said, 'If you want me to speak to parliament about this, I'll gladly do it.' I think I will consider Luke next time just to give my database a wider realm. He offered; I did not ask him.

The process works well. As I said, this time we got a formal committee response only six months after it was presented. That is a lot quicker than previous episodes. Yes, we get a formal response from the minister after it has been processed, so the process is good.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Mrs PRENTICE: This is probably not the role of the petitions committee but I was interested in how many people you had on the ground in Syria, and whether any of those are Australians.

Mr Johnston: Barnabas Fund does not employ people. We have an international projects team based in our UK head office. They establish the network with the Christian churches. In Syria right now we have a network of about four organisations, all run by Christian entities, that manage the distribution of the funds.

Mrs PRENTICE: Is their role, as well, in relation to your petition, to help them seek resettlement?

Mr Johnston: Yes. We want a long-term solution—not just a short-term solution to give them food and all that. Somehow we have to provide these people with some permanent accommodation.

Mrs PRENTICE: A long-term solution would be peace, though.

Mr Johnston: Absolutely. I will refer you to what is happening with the current crisis in Iraq now. I know this is not part of the Syria petition. I was in the UK only three weeks ago. The international director said that they had got onto surplus army tents at a US facilities in Baghdad, all packed up and not used. So Barnabas has paid for these tents from the US government—about \$750,000—and we are currently transporting those tents to northern Iraq.

We approached Cameron of the UK to see if the UK government would fund the transport of the containers from Baghdad to Iraq. Unfortunately he declined. He said they have many other priorities. The cost of transport is close to \$1 million. However, these tents will provide permanent accommodation for 1,000 refugees. They are

large tents. They are air-conditioned. They are heated. They have kitchen facilities. They are run by generators. This will give the refugees some permanent accommodation.

A lot of our supporters ring up and say, 'We want to continue to give—we know the need—but is there any chance of providing some long-term hope for these refugees?'

Mr HOGAN: Mr Johnston, as you know, we do not comment on the content of the petition, but as with other petitioners today I would like to thank you for using this process. Members of the Standing Committee on Petitions view it as a very important and valuable part of our process of government and getting feedback from the community. So thank you for the fact that your organisation does that.

I would also like to make a personal comment on your organisation. I am very aware of what your organisation does, and I wish to thank you and acknowledge you for all the work you do across where you operate.

Mr Johnston: I thank you for those comments. I am just blown away. As I said it was only 2005 when the organisation started. We are still in that little office down at Loganholme. The first year's income was about \$300,000 and last year we did \$6 million, which is incredible. I put it down to the support. Australians are very generous people.

I think the beauty of Barnabas—you may be aware of our organisation—is that we give a bi-monthly magazine, which is free but which gives updates on all the work that we are doing. So people can see where their money has been used. And I think that gives supporters confidence that their money is being used to change lives and set people free from horrendous conditions.

Can I ask: how many people here have actually been to the Syria or the Middle East? I can see many of you have. I was in Damascus and Syria just before this current situation broke. It is a lovely nation. Christians have been able to do their things, and then this terrible tragedy has happened. You could walk in the streets of Damascus, with all their beautiful stalls and everything. Now it is just decimated. It is shocking to think that that can happen. We in Australia are a blessed country. When I am going around and speaking to churches, I just say: 'Thank God for what you have in Australia. You go home. You get a full meal. You turn your tap on; you have water'. I said, 'Go home and thank God that you live in Australia.' That is my message.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Keep up the message of value for money as well. It is one that we as politicians tend to leverage off. Can I join in associating myself with the comments of the chair in highlighting the fact that the committee provides opportunity for petitioners to evaluate the process, rather than the content or the thing. You mentioned in your opening comments the expedient way in which it was dealt with. I just want you to understand that that would be more than likely a matter of cyclical engagement as to when it was put into the system, because I do not want to impede future committees or have people thinking, 'I put one in last year, and it got there in five months; the next year it is 12.' It is more cyclical—

Mr Johnston: A cyclical thing, yes.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: than good management. I just want you to highlight that. My question goes to the effect. I want you to comment on what effect you believe it has on people who you asked to join your petition when empowering them to be part of a movement through the Petitions Committee. What effect, either positive or negative, do you think that it has on those people that you are asking to get involved?

Mr Johnston: I think, in 99 per cent of cases, they felt positive about it. They feel that they are actually doing something. In Australia, we have a very lazy methodology: 'It'll be right, mate,' or, 'Someone else can do it.' We have a lot of people who attend churches. They like to attend churches. They go there and worship the Lord and all that, but we encourage them: 'Here is something that you can actually do to perhaps alter your destiny.' That is why the success rate on signing up the petitions is so good, because they feel as though they are actually doing something to assist their fellow brothers and sisters who are going through tremendous persecution. A lot of them cannot give—a lot of them are pensioners; they are on restricted income—but here is a way: 'Sign up and you can contribute.' It is very, very positive. I think they feel motivated about it.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: The thing with the petitions process is that it is a political instrument as such where you can have an issue, however wide-ranging it may be, presented in the House and, as you alluded to earlier, have members of the House speak to or against any given topic. Thank you for the energy with which you have enthused in the cause that you pursue. I ask God to bless you, and I thank the committee.

CHAIR: Thank you very much, and thank you, Mr Johnston, for your attendance here today. If the committee has further questions for you, the secretariat will contact you.

FORBES, Mrs Tanya Louise, Founder, Gold Coast Dyslexia Support Group

[11:46]

Awareness and support for sufferers of dyslexia

CHAIR: Welcome. I remind you, as I do all witnesses, that, although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, this hearing is a legal proceeding of parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the chambers themselves. The evidence given today will be recorded by Hansard and will attract parliamentary privilege. You may make a brief opening statement, or we can go straight to questions.

Mrs Forbes: I have a brief opening statement which explains the little postcard that you have all been given. Today I am here as a voice for the voiceless, and they are the children with dyslexia in Australia. The petition process was great at giving families a voice.

To give an overview, dyslexia is a learning difficulty that affects a child's ability to have a good understanding of written language. Children with dyslexia struggle with reading, writing and spelling. Dyslexia is a neurological learning difference. It has been proved by brain imagery to be a difference where children will have difficulty, first of all, hearing the individual sounds in words, which is phonological processing, and, secondly, with letter sound associations, which we call orthographic processing. Dyslexia is on a continuum from mild to severe. We are looking at an estimated 20 per cent, or one in five, of our population being on that continuum.

Our dyslexia advocacy has been a two-prong approach. Firstly, we are looking at increasing an understanding of dyslexia in education; secondly, we want to address the ineffective teaching of reading in our schools. I say to everyone that I consider dyslexia to be the forgotten learning disability in Australia, and probably the world. For years, we have had parents advocating in schools and receiving very little assistance, and many have even faced denial from schools that dyslexia actually exists. It is, though, a learning disability covered by the Disability Discrimination Act and the Disability Standards for Education as a disorder or malfunction that results in a person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction.

With respect to reading, the whole-language teaching of reading has disadvantaged Australian students for many decades. Research indicates that at the moment 40 per cent of our students have inadequate literacy skills; 20 per cent of students have significant reading difficulties; and an estimated three to five per cent of students will have severe and persistent reading disability. The Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2011 revealed that 46 per cent of 15- to 19-year-olds are functionally illiterate, which means they have inadequate literacy skills to cope with the basic demands of everyday work and life.

Scientific research supports the explicit teaching of language and literacy using evidence based methods, not the current constructivist whole-language approach based on ideology. Evidence based methods is also known as the big six of reading: oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

Phonemic awareness and phonics are a really important foundation for our children. They help strengthen those neural pathways, where they have their weakness in acquiring written language. Research also indicates that the big six benefits all children, because it gives them the connection of oral language to written language so that they have the skills to crack the alphabet code.

My advocacy is not just about education reform; more importantly, it is about social justice. Currently, as we sit here, we have 729,000 children in Australian classrooms who will be struggling at the moment. Most of these children are currently unidentified and receive very little or no support. The lifelong social and emotional damage to these children is not acceptable. We have a problem and we need to make a change. Children as young as five years are experiencing confusion and anxiety as they struggle to learn the alphabet. These feelings then continue to escalate for the next 12 years of their education, and the downward spiral continues with increased feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. As a result, that will lead to disengagement, withdrawal and behavioural problems.

Unidentified and untreated dyslexia is an enormous social and economic burden to our country. There is a huge loss of people-potential due to limited employment opportunities, mental-health concerns and possible corrective detention. We need to empower our schools so that our children are no longer instructional casualties of an education system that does not understand them or support them. Defy dyslexia—that you have the card for—is an umbrella for 14 dyslexia support groups nationwide. Together we have come up with a list of five objectives that we would like to see, to improve the learning outcomes of children with dyslexia.

The first is identification of children at risk—the earlier the better. The second is explicit instruction in scientifically-valid evidence based reading methods. The third is inclusive classrooms in schools that provide our students with accommodations and adjustments. The fourth is intervention using multisensory structured language

and the fifth is giving our children access to the curriculum with assistive technology. Thank you so much for this opportunity today to present my concerns.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. Although we should not be making any statements about the content of petitions, I agree with you completely about whole language and phonics. Could you please tell us about the history behind the petition, what led you to petition the House rather than other methods of advocacy and have you engaged in other forms of advocacy, such as writing to ministers?

Mrs Forbes: Yes and yes. The petition was great for having a collective voice, for being able to show parliament there was groundswell. Unfortunately, I do not think the groundswell is as big as it could be, because of the core of the problem—the lack of awareness, understanding and identification. Bit by bit, word is getting out there and we are increasing.

My advocacy has also been writing and meeting with education ministers, both the state minister, the Hon. John-Paul Langbroek, and the federal minister, the Hon. Christopher Pyne. I have had meetings. There has been correspondence. Defy Dyslexia has a website as well where parents can log on and have a link sent to their local parliamentarian. We are trying to really show that we have a national voice.

The history behind us wanting to have a groundswell dates back to 2010, when we had the National Dyslexia Working Party report presented to parliament, but most of the recommendations have not been implemented. At the time, the comment from the Hon. Bill Shorten was, 'Where are your parents?' I have been working with committee members directly, such as Mandy Naton, Nola Firth and Margaret Hardy. I have basically been contacting them, promising them, that we will bring the parents so that hopefully we can get the recommendations of the Dyslexia Working Party as well as the findings of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy put back on to the parliamentary table.

CHAIR: Thank you. Your petition attracted a relatively large number of signatures. Engaging with communities when collecting signatures for a petition can be an important part of the petitioning process. Could you tell us about how the signature gathering was conducted for your petition and also about your experience and interaction while gathering the signatures?

Mrs Forbes: The collection of signatures was interesting, because we have these 14 support groups nationwide. We put a PDF copy of the petition on our central Facebook group with instructions to basically circulate it as widely as we could. As school mums a lot of us were out on the oval at sports carnivals, sporting events, with our little clipboards. Even on election day, there were a handful of us who were 50 metres away from the polling booth with our clipboards. It was probably a handful of very passionate people who collected the signatures.

The interesting thing is we probably had close to 3,000 more signatures than were actually registered. As I said to the Hon. Karen Andrews when I handed her the petition, the interesting part was, because dyslexia is a genetic condition, a lot of these parents also had dyslexia and were unable to understand the instructions about keeping it single sided and keeping the template the way it was. We would have had 3,000 signatures that were on double-sided pages, but that is the nature of what we are advocating for.

CHAIR: Now that a government response to your petition has been received, would you like to take this opportunity to reflect on your experience of the petitions process and share any suggestions as to how it might be improved?

Mrs Forbes: As with the previous presenter, I was really happy with the process. As I explained to James, this is a follow-up petition to the one that Angela Weeks presented a year ago. The reason we did that is we thought an election is often a great time to have a voice. I guess it was very strategic in the timing. A similar thing was done with the Queensland state election. Again, we waited for election time to actually show our force and make contact with local members based on the fact that there is often change around election time. A similar thing is happening in Victoria—for anyone who is watching. There is a large amount of information about dyslexia out in the press—working with *The Age*—and things like that. It is great to have the timing. What was the rest of the question?

CHAIR: How could the petitions process be improved?

Mrs Forbes: Again, the response was fast and it was wonderful to be able to track the progress via *Hansard*, when it was lodged, responses and so forth. It is a great process. You are a collective voice, and that collective voice does receive a response from the minister of whatever the domain is. Of course, obviously, because it is a public record, you have the ability to share the outcomes with everyone. Generally, I think the process is very good. I understand there is a wait. I had a similar wait of about five months but, when we advocate, we are in this for years, so we understand that the wheels are moving.

CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Again, to reiterate, as we have done with each of the petitioners, whilst it is an extremely worthy cause that you energise yourself for, the committee's interest is more in the process. However, drawing a long bow from that, one of the charters that we have is to investigate other advocacy through the parliament. I am aware that Minister Pyne has had round tables on dyslexia. Were you involved in that, and, if so, can you share that with the committee?

Mrs Forbes: Yes, I was involved at the round table. This will be the third I have been involved in.

The federal round table was brilliant. Even though I had been in contact with people such as Mandy Nayton, Nola Firth and Lorraine Hammond, it actually gave us an opportunity to congregate. We had dinner the night before the round table and realised that we are so very much on the same page. It is great to have Australia's leading educators and researchers all united for a cause, sending the same message and things like that.

From there, it has led even further. We are still all very much in contact with each other. We are quite delighted to see changes, with more support for students with disabilities, Students First and all the new initiatives that are coming out and that are giving our children a voice. We do still have a research-to-action gap in our schools, and we also have a policy-to-practice gap in our schools. That is going to be the next thing we have to look at: trying to close both those gaps.

From the round table, though, we are actually producing a documentary called *Outside the Square*. I have left my job as a biomedical researcher and for the next six months I will be on and off planes, travelling to all those capital cities and interviewing all of the people I met at the round table to put the documentary together. Originally it was intended to give to families, so they would have a better understanding of their children, and to give to schools, but we are actually in negotiation with the education department to potentially look at distributing it to every school in the country.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: In giving evidence this morning, you mentioned in your opening comments that it was 40 per cent with inadequate reading skills. Then you went on and gave another statistic: 46 per cent for people between 15 and 19. Can you just reiterate that one? I was not quick enough.

Mrs Forbes: It is from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The funny thing is that it is always 40 per cent—every time! It has actually been creeping up. The criteria they use looks at functional literacy. Functional literacy basically measures the whole population—alarming, it is the 15-to-19 age group that seems so high—and the ability of different demographics to cope with everyday literacy, whether that is completing a form or just any demands at work. We have nearly half of our children leaving school with inadequate literacy skills. To me that is probably the biggest red flag, which is why that was a statistic I brought in today.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Of that 46 per cent with inadequate literacy skills, how many do you think would suffer directly from dyslexia?

Mrs Forbes: Twenty. That is not of the 46 per cent; 20 per cent of our whole population. The number is creeping up only because, as we are getting more awareness in the community we are suddenly realising that that continuum is quite broad. The Australian Bureau of Statistics is actually supporting the fact that we have 40 per cent at the moment that are instructional casualties to our teaching of reading. Half of those children are going to possibly be dyslexic—they have the neurological difficulty—but there is still another 20 per cent there. It is the instruction that does not suit these children.

Mr HOGAN: Thank you for coming. I have said it to everyone, so I will repeat it to you as well: members of the Standing Committee on Petitions view this as a very important part of our process and of the government process. So thank you for using this and for your feedback on that.

I also just want to make a personal comment on this issue. I have had some exposure, through a member of my family, to this issue. I love the way you are going about this, in the sense that you are offering the solution. I very much understand phonics and the importance of the inclusion of that within the system and of identifying students that need that. I think that is a really broad issue, and I think you are just touching the tip of an iceberg, with a whole issue there.

A lot of people come to this committee with an issue, but you have the solution with some of this and it has been very well explained. So, well done, and thank you for what you are doing.

Mrs Forbes: Thank you. That is, I guess, why my advocacy has been so successful. I have a very, very close working relationship with the Hon. John-Paul Langbroek because he knows that whenever I send him an email, I am going to have concerns and that I will present problems. Likewise, we have set up a pilot school, Robina State

School on the Gold Coast, which was the first fully accredited school, which we have as a model for other schools to follow. But, yes, getting everyone on board takes a lot of energy.

Mr HOGAN: [inaudible]

Ms RYAN: Tanya, you mentioned JP Langbroek, the state minister for education. Is this really more of a state issue? I appreciate it would be handy to have a national approach, but education, particularly in primary schools, is probably a primary role of state governments.

Mrs Forbes: I guess it is both. Every state is in the same mess, so this is a national problem. I am very fortunate; in Queensland, in the three years I have been advocating hard, I have seen a lot of positive changes. Queensland has gone from being probably at the bottom of the pile up towards the top now. But, if you look at New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, it is a national problem. So we need a national directive, and then the states can go away and work on their individual levels. We do fall under the national curriculum with our teaching of reading, so in the national arena that is probably where I have more of a voice. But we also need more support for students with disabilities. There are a lot of national agendas where we also need to have a voice.

Ms RYAN: Have you asked JP, for example, to put it on perhaps the COAG agenda? That is where all the states meet together at a national level.

Mrs Forbes: Great idea. What a great idea. I will email him when I get home.

Ms RYAN: I was just interested in where the 14 groups are. I have one locally, at Fig Tree Pocket.

Mrs Forbes: Yes, that would be Brisbane Dyslexics. We have three in Queensland: Townsville, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. Then there is one in Sydney and the Orange-Bathurst one in mid-west New South Wales. There is one in Melbourne. There are a few smaller groups in Melbourne, but they are not yet under the Defy Dyslexia umbrella. There is a group in Tasmania. In South Australia, they are in the Barossa and Gawler, which is a large, strong group as well. There is a group in Perth. So we are basically national. Queensland is the strongest, with three.

Ms RYAN: Thanks.

CHAIR: I have a few more questions. Early identification of dyslexia seems to be the key component in providing support to affected students. In your view, what can schools and governments do to ensure that the greatest possible number of students with dyslexia are identified at the earliest possible opportunity?

Mrs Forbes: I love this question. Having done this journey with my own son, he is proof of the need for early intervention. The three words I used to the Hon. Christopher Pyne were 'early, early, early', which is what it is all about. We can identify a child at risk at age 5½ with 92 per cent accuracy. How do we do that? We look at that foundation, oral language leading into phonemic awareness. So, if a child in kindergarten or prep is having trouble learning the alphabet, sounding out words, identifying rhyme or clapping out syllables, let us notice those children, because they are the ones at risk. Then, as we get further into kindergarten or prep, we are looking at whether they are able to associate the sound with the letter and write what we know as a simple c-b-c word, such as 'cat'. Again, the difficulties are going to be so obvious.

This year, at Robina, is our third year of the pilot. We have really finetuned the first year. There are 25 per cent of children that they have identified as at risk. It is going to be an interesting time, because this is a neurological difference. Dyslexics tend to be a bit more right brained and have deficits in the language domains, which is why they have these problems with phonological and orthographic processing.

CHAIR: Thank you. One of the key steps the government is taking in response to students with disabilities is better data collection. In your view, are the current approaches to collecting data appropriate; and, if not, how can they be improved?

Mrs Forbes: The data is too late. The PATR and the PATM, which are the reading and numeracy assessments, are in the second half of grade 2. Now, we have already missed that window for early intervention. Then, when we bring NAPLAN into it, we are in a situation where, if we are identifying that gap in children in grade 3—here is another statistic—only one in eight of those children will ever catch up. So it is back to early identification, identifying the children at risk in prep. Halfway through prep is optimal; we have had six months with them and we can see if they are already struggling with the alphabet.

Then we go straight into the early intervention. The early intervention is going to, first of all, be developing that phonemic awareness, teaching the kids to be able to clap out syllables and finger spell the sounds in words. There are all these multisensory techniques. It is basically learning for meaning. It develops and strengthens the weaknesses in the neural pathways. We can start doing this with our children early. We call that early prevention. That can be done with a whole class to start with.

Say we get towards the end of kindergarten and prep and we notice there are children having difficulties, we can bring in the early intervention. This would be small group instruction where we are, again, developing phonemics and then moving into phonics. We try to teach the students to connect the phonemes, or sounds, to their symbols, which are the graphemes. It is very intensive and needs to be done early, because research out of Yale says that once a child hits eight the window to make a difference to that weakness in language is closed. We need to rewire these brains before the age of eight.

CHAIR: You were saying on early intervention that in the second year of primary school you only get one in three being able to catch up. Was that the statistic—one in three?

Mrs Forbes: No, the statistic is for grade 3. If we wait until grade 3—after we have done our PAT reading and PAT numeracy and we are looking at NAPLAN—only one in eight can—

CHAIR: With the earlier intervention in, say, kindergarten or prep, what is the success rate in getting them up to the same standard as others?

Mrs Forbes: Unfortunately, I have no stats for that. That is only because this is new. This is new worldwide. I could possibly have a look at Sally Shaywitz's research out of Yale. She does say that they have noticed a significant differences in functional MRIs of children during reading if they get there before the window closes at eight. I am sure there will be a stat—

CHAIR: Could you send me something personally on that? I am interested.

Mrs Forbes: Yes, I will. Back on the early intervention, we will be able to get the data from Queensland soon. Early Start is something that the education minister has commissioned Marion Meiers at ACER to develop. That is an early literacy and numeracy screener. It is perfect in that it has all of those indicators I am talking about—being able to hear the phonemes and being able to associate letters with their names and sounds. It is not just literacy; it encompasses numeracy as well. I think that gets administered every six months. So we are going to have the data from these children halfway through prep right through to the end of grade 2, and then in grade 3 we can start using NAPLAN data as well. I have looked at it. I would love to see something like that in every state. It has been developed. It has been done. We just need to get it out there.

CHAIR: The ministerial response outlines a series of steps the government is taking to assist students with disabilities more generally and students with dyslexia in particular. What other steps do you think the government could be taking to better support children with dyslexia?

Mrs Forbes: I am worried that, at the moment, at a national level there is not the knowledge among teachers to be able to identify these children. That is why we are doing the film. We are hoping to get a bit of a blanket understanding in the community to start with and then start directing them to things such as Early Start. We really need a change in mind set. Lorraine Hammond provided me with the dates, and 1976 was the year that whole language came into our schools. I was one of the first to go through whole language as I started school that year. Let's think about it. I am in my mid-40s. Most of our teachers out there only know whole language. They read about and research phonics, but the problem we have is that phonics is not being taught correctly. Screening will not be done correctly because our teachers do not have that knowledge. There is the online training module. It is good, but it is not great. There is just a whole change in mind set needed for our educators to understand this. The response mentioned that the PAT reading and NAPLAN is, like I said, too late. We really need early intervention. It can be done early. Let's watch Early Start and see how that goes.

Mr BUCHHOLZ: Educators educate according to the curriculum. How much of this lies within the curriculum?

Mrs Forbes: This is where I guess I come back to my advocacy and to something I have not mentioned, and that is that, as well as writing to education ministers, another thing I do is write submissions. Every submission I have written, whether about teacher training or the curriculum, has been for and on behalf of dyslexia support groups. I have mentioned the concerns I have with teacher training and with the curriculum. With primary school, I think the curriculum is a little bit too diverse and way too fast. This came out in the review as being a common issue with a lot of people. If we could just focus in those early years on building literacy and numeracy, maybe in the later years we could bring in the other subjects. High school is great for diversity, because we have worked on that foundation of literacy and numeracy, but I think we need to work on the important, simple things of literacy and numeracy and really slow down that curriculum.

The other problem I have with the national curriculum is that there is too much interconnection of different areas of learning with each other. It kind of took away the impact of 'Let's just focus on this only'—if that makes sense.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence. If the committee has further questions, the secretariat will contact you. We now come to the end of our public hearing session. I thank all of our participants for their contribution. It has been a most interesting public hearing. As our participants today know, the aim of today's hearing is twofold: first, to allow petitioners to expand on the issues raised in petitions, particularly in the light of any government response; and, second, to hear about the experience of members of the community in petitioning the House. The information received here today has been helpful in this regard, and there will be an official transcript of this public hearing published on the committee's website in due course.

Resolved that these proceedings be published.

Committee adjourned at 12:17