

**Statement by
National Presidents' Forum
Of
Organisations
Of
Serving and Former Members of the
Australian Defence Force.**

Canberra 13th August 2007



Submission to 2007 Federal Election Contestants from Organisations Representing ADF Members and Ex-Service Groups

Introduction

A Forum of National Presidents representing organisations supporting the interests of serving and former members of the Australian Defence Force was convened on the 13th August 2007 to discuss issues of concern to their members.

Service Impact

The Ex- Service Organisations assembled believe that the community's appreciation of the special nature of Defence service has been allowed to deteriorate. There is a grave concern at the progressive move to see veteran support as welfare. Service in the Australian Defence Force comes with a cost not just to the individual service member but their dependants as well. Government and Departments have a leadership role in ensuring that the community clearly appreciates that veteran's and their families deserve special recognition reflecting their contribution to the service of our nation.

Servicemen and Women expect that the conditions under which they enlist and serve will be honoured. There are many on going examples where this obligation has not been fulfilled.

Serving ADF members seek such an undertaking that there will be no reduction of benefits, and that Government's clear obligation to servicemen and women will be met.

The Summit concluded that over time, successive Governments have fallen well short of meeting that responsibility to the individual members of the Australian Defence Force and their dependants.

Issues

It was the wish of the delegates that all political parties should be aware of the significant issues that were canvassed in order that that they have the electoral opportunity to address these matters as party platform material is developed for the forthcoming Federal vote. The delegates and the members of their associations are aware of the interest of your political colleagues in the welfare of the defence services and veteran communities and take comfort from statements of commitment to these important matters but at the same time are looking for specific proposals to be enacted during the next term of government.

Specific Proposals

The Veteran communities' principal concerns are embodied in the following key proposals, noting that there are several particular elements to each. Parliamentary parties are asked to acknowledge these concerns and indicate broadly how they will respond.

- The present range of financial benefits in respect of disability pensions, military superannuation, and compensation payments, represents an unacceptable minimal level. Respective Governments must maintain the real value of these payments by adopting appropriate methods of indexation. Noting the adoption by Government of a formula involving Male Total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE) for the Aged and Service Pensions, all elements of all DVA payments and military superannuation benefits should accordingly be indexed using the same benchmark indexation method.
- Transition from Service life to post-Service life is regarded as a critical step in the maintenance of well being of ex-service personnel and their families. Governments are

asked to ensure that this transition process is comprehensively managed to ensure that the deficiencies in the following processes are rectified:

- Appropriate invalidity and other financial entitlements are in place to ensure discharging personnel can access these without delay.
- Any adverse medical conditions arising from service have been identified and adequately recorded in ADF service documents.
- Appropriate treatment and rehabilitation programs have been instituted and will continue without interruption.
- Servicemen and women are offered comprehensive relevant financial advice, vocational support, and family assistance to ensure a smooth transition from the Service.
- Servicemen and women are provided with comprehensive advice on how they may access medical and other support services post separation when the need arise;
- Provision of timely follow-up by the Services to ensure that any residual issues are quickly resolved.
- The value of the TPI payment compared with the Age and Service Pensions has eroded since the change in indexation method and should be indexed in the same manner. Government should restore the TPI payment to the level it would have been had it been indexed in the same manner as these from 1997.
- Recognise defence widows and their dependants as members of the veteran community by improved recognition by politicians, the bureaucracy and the ex-service community and;
 - Fully index the entire War Widows(ers) Payment.
 - Remove the age eligibility for access to the income support supplement (ISS).
- Military superannuation is a key component of the employment conditions for the men and women of the ADF and should recognize the unique aspects of a service career. The following aspects of the DFRDB scheme do not fully adhere to this principle and need to be addressed in a positive manner;
 - The DFRDB Act requires amending to restore the full DFRDB pension when notional life expectancy has been reached to relieve the superannuant from re-paying much more than the original lump sum commuted.
 - DFRDB widows' superannuation is only partially indexed and the DFRDB legislation requires amending to permit full indexation of their pensions.
 - The discriminatory aspects in the taxation of military superannuation should be removed. The DFRDB and MSBS payments should be excluded when determining the Marginal Tax rate for the taxable income for superannuants.
 - The taxation burden on military superannuation invalidity payments should be eliminated as it places an unfair burden on former ADF members whose disabilities impair their income earning abilities.
 - Final Average Salary. The current Final Average Salary (FAS3), which is the average salary of the final three years of service of an ADF member, be changed to the member's "Final Salary" for those servicemen and women who may be killed in service.
- Pharmaceuticals prescribed to entitled ex-service personnel be available at no cost. Failing this the Pharmaceutical Allowance must be increased in line with any change to co-payments in order that the change is cost-neutral to the client.
- Veteran wellbeing is directly related to the level and quality of family support available. Partners and carers do play a key role in holding families together and looking after

veterans who are either physically or mentally disabled. Recognising that partners in these circumstances are themselves often denied the opportunity to engage in remunerative employment, we seek a review of carer payments, allowances and provisions, which more accurately reflect the very significant contribution, which recognised carers, make.

- A speedy commencement of the study into the health of the children of Vietnam veterans as asked for by the COVVHS committee.
- The mental health wellbeing of the members of the ADF is an important issue. There are indications that burdens placed on some personnel within the ADF could be impacting adversely on those members and their families. We seek a study into suicides within the ADF and discharged service personnel.
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills (ASIST). The ASIST suicide prevention programme is inadequate because:
 - Whilst many city dwellers have benefited from the two day programme, many veterans and families in rural and remote regions are denied attendance because they cannot afford the expense of travel and accommodation.
 - It is important that exclusively veteran families groups attend the courses. Present management are focused only on individual applications.
 - No effective organisation exists to promote courses and gather groups together.
 - The VVCS should administer the programme with the advice of a state ESO committee and resources for promotion and the paying of travel and accommodation for those in remote areas.
- Veterans are encountering problems because they are required to deal with multiple government agencies to access entitlements. DVA should become a “one-stop shop” for ex-servicemen and women and their families requiring assistance to provide a consistent and beneficial interpretation of all the relevant pieces of legislation affecting their welfare and other entitlements.
- The Veteran Entitlement of the Defence Service Home Loan (DSHL) was \$25,000 in 1972, which was able to pay for a three bedroom brick veneer home. Today, Australia is enduring a housing crisis. This has a severe effect on ex-service members who hold entitlement to the DSHL which has not been indexed for over 35 years. The forum wants to see an increase of this loan amount to reflect the Australian Median Home Price Index.

Conclusion

The organisations at the summit now ask all the major political parties to re-affirm a demonstrable commitment to the welfare and support of those who serve or who have served in the Australian Defence Force, along with their dependants. This should include acknowledgement of the special nature of defence service employment and the inherent dangers involved in providing for the security of our great nation