



Election Promises Watchlist

There is a long list of Veterans' Affairs promises made by the Labor Party during the last election campaign. Many of them were the result of our representations. The promises are to be honoured during the new government's first three year term in office.

At the half way point, how are they going?

In brief, nearly all the promises have been honoured or are clearly in the process of being honoured.

A few remain unaddressed, including 'free pharmaceuticals for the treatment of war caused disabilities'.

List of Promises already honoured or clearly underway

Provide fair indexation and increases for veterans' and war widows' pensions

Commencing on 27 March 2008, the continuing loss of value of the TPI and other pensions ceased. New indexing halted pensions falling any further behind Australia's rising standard of living.

In addition to losses being stemmed, there were some actual 'catch-up' increases to pensions.

For ten years we (in association with the TPI Federation and Partners of Veterans Association) campaigned for these changes. We are fortunate indeed we achieved success when we did. Success would be much more difficult in the present economic climate.

A great deal of credit must go to the Blue Ryan, National President of the TPI Federation, for his excellent leadership during the campaign.

Provide extra financial support through 'Making Ends Meet'

The Utilities Allowance for Veterans Affairs pensioners was increased from \$107.20 to \$500 a year and is paid quarterly.

Telephone Allowance was increased from \$88 to \$132 a year to help with internet costs.

Extend bereavement payments for single TPI and EDA veterans who die without sufficient assets to pay for a funeral

This has been implemented.

Automatic granting of War Widow's Pension to widows of TTI and Intermediate Rate pensioners

This has been implemented.

Form a Special Claims Unit

Prior to the election, compensation claims were taking far too long to process.

A Special Claims Unit was set up in the Department to reduce processing times.

The Minister has reported that: “A comparison of the two financial years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008, shows processing time reductions of 15.7 per cent in VEA claims, 7.8 per cent for SRCA initial liability claims and 30.9 per cent for MRCA initial liability claims”.

Establish an inter-departmental working group to help deal with multiple agencies

Depending on their service, younger veterans and ex-service personnel seeking disability compensation may be entitled to benefits under three different Acts – the *Veterans Entitlements Act 1986*, the *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* and the *Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2004*.

This has been confusing to say the least and may have contributed to at least one suicide.

A trial has commenced requiring only one claim form to be filled out regardless of the number of agencies involved.

Also, the medical reviews that must be undertaken have been reduced; information sharing across DVA, Centrelink and ComSuper has commenced; a practical handbook has been published to guide veterans; ADF identity card is now accepted as Proof of Identity across institutions; and, ADF final medical examinations has been expanded to cover the requirement of DVA and ComSuper.

Vietnam Veterans Family Study

After some years of preliminary work, a study has now been started into the health of veterans’ families.

The study will take some seven years to complete but we hope some conclusions will be reached along the way.

A veterans’ committee has been formed to monitor progress. Graeme Davis, the President of our Lismore sub-branch, and

father of a disabled child, is our representative.

Increased funding for the ASIST programme

This is a valuable programme to help us identify anyone around us who may be contemplating suicide and to direct them to help.

There has been a boost to its funding including funds to subsidise travel and accommodation for those living long distances from course venues.

Conduct an independent study into suicide in the ex-service community

There was a series of suicides of veterans who were dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs. We wondered whether the way the Department was dealing with these cases could have been a contributing factor.

Professor Dunt conducted a study and made 21 recommendations including measures to improve the Department’s dealings with veterans at risk.

Other recommendations include strengthening of mental health programs, including suicide prevention; the further simplification of administrative procedures faced by those transitioning out of the Australian Defence Force or applying for compensation; more experienced case managers assigned to support clients with complex needs; and DVA increase access to mental health clinical expertise.

The government has allocated \$9.5 million to implement the recommendations.

Dr Dunt’s report is on the DVA web-site.

Examine Military Compensation Arrangements

The Terms of Reference has been established and submissions invited for a review of the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Scheme.

Details are on the DVA web-site.

The Review Secretariat can be contacted

via phone (02) 6289 6095 or email
milcomp.review@dva.gov.au.

Revisit the recommendation of the Clarke Review

The Hon John Clarke QC chaired a review of veterans' entitlement which reported in January 2003.

The government is revisiting recommendations the review made which were not accepted by the government of the time.

In particular, the government will reconsider recommendations relating to the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan and Defence participants in the atomic test in Australia.

Details on the DVA web-site.

Improve the transition management process

The transition process for service men and women leaving the Australian Defence Force (ADF) and moving into the compensation system has been, for many, a rough one.

Professor Dunt's report on veterans' suicide made five recommendations to improve the transition process which will be implemented.

Professor Dunt also made some relevant recommendation in his Review of Mental Health Care in the ADF and Transition through Discharge. These will also be implemented.

Improvement in the transition process will take continuing commitment and hard work for some time to come.

See the article *Is the ADF doing enough on Mental Health?* later in this edition.

Formation of an independent defence honours and awards tribunal

The tribunal is up and running and presently examining the following:

- The Tribunal shall inquire into and report on recognition of unattached

Australian Entertainers in the Vietnam Conflict. Submissions close on 1 June 2009.

- Eligibility of Royal Australian Air Force Personnel, serving in Vietnam between 29 March and 29 April 1975, for the Vietnam Medal
- The Tribunal is inquiring into recognition for Special Air Service Regiment counter terrorist and special recovery duties. Submissions close on 18 May 2009..
- The Tribunal is inquiring into unresolved recognition for the Battle of Long Tan. Submissions closed on 23 March 2009.

Submissions are welcomed. Visit the web-site at:

www.defence-honours-tribunal.gov.au/

Establish a Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Ex-Service Matters

The Council is up and running, considering issues and giving advice.

Extend the income support supplement to widows without dependents

Widows under 58 years of age without dependents are now entitled to the Income Support Supplement.

Release and consult on the Military Superannuation Review report

The main issue is that military superannuation is indexed only to increases in the cost of living and with no regard to increase in wages. This means pensions do not keep up with increases in Australia's standard of living.

The report was released, a new review established and submissions invited.

The report and the added submissions are now being considered by the government.

Inquiry into former F111 Deseal/Reseal workers

RAAF workers were exposed to dangerous chemicals while maintaining F111 fuel tanks.

An Inquiry into the health of these personnel and their families has been established. The final public hearing was held on 17 April 2009 and the committee is now preparing the final report.

Increase access to Widow's Benefit for post-retirement marriages

Payment of Widow's Benefit has been backdated to 1 July 2003 where an ex-serviceman or woman entered a marital relationship after 60 years of age, but died within five years of the relationship commencing.

Introduce a National Transport Concessions Scheme

The idea is to allow Seniors Card holders who use public transport services outside their home State to receive the concessions offered to those states' residents. All States and territories except Queensland and Western Australia are now providing concessions to interstate cardholders, with discussions continuing with the recalcitrant states.

Generally speaking DVA Concession Card holders are given concessional fares when interstate.

Implement a comprehensive ADF mental health 'Lifecycle' package

The idea is to look after the mental health of service men and women from enlistment to discharge and reentry into civilian life.

Annual mental health screening, resilience research and training, family support trials are some of the parts of this package.

It is a package that will take commitment, particularly from the ADF.

Make community mental health more 'ex-service friendly'

The Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health is developing an education kit for community mental health workers.

Include young ex-service people with disabilities in the Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement

Housing arrangements for younger disabled veterans was unsatisfactory.

Now the National Disability Agreement includes a commitment to ensure that younger veterans have access to specialist disability services where Veterans' Affairs programs are not available to provide the necessary care and support which they require.

Review the aged care needs of veterans and 'special needs'

The Government is conducting a number of reviews in aged and community care which includes the Aged Care Funding Instrument review due in September 2009.

Provide zero real interest loans for aged care facilities

The government reports:

"On 17 September, the Minister for Ageing, the Hon Justine Elliot MP, announced the first stage of the Australian Government's \$300 million two-part election commitment to provide funding for aged care beds where they were previously unlikely to be established."

Hold an annual Veterans' Health Week

The first Veterans' Health Week is proposed to be held in August 2009 with the theme 'Physical Activity'.

Increase financial assistance for Ex-Service Organisations

Increased funding has been provided and has been helpful in maintaining our ability to provide assistance to the veteran community.

Provide free Australian flags for families of veterans

Following the death of a veteran, their family can now receive a free Australian flag from their local MP or Senator.

Declare Battle for Australia Day

The Governor-General signed the proclamation for Battle for Australia Day on 19 June 2008 for the first Wednesday in September to pay tribute to the men and women who served in the defence of

Australia in 1942 and 1943.

Declare Merchant Navy Day

Proclamation signed to declare Merchant Navy day on 24 June 2008 for 3 September each year, to remember the service and sacrifice of merchant mariners during times of war.

Seek UNESCO Protection for the Kokoda Track

Through a Joint Understanding, the Australian Government is providing financial assistance to the PNG Government to protect the Kokoda Track and the Owen Stanley Range.

Implement Post-Armistice Korean Service Review recommendations

The Government will start issuing the Australian General Service Medal – Korea from early 2010 as well as the Returned from Active Service Badge to those who completed 30 days in South Korea during the post-Armistice period, from 28 July 1953 to 19 April 1956.

Ballarat Prisoner-of-War Memorial

Declared as a national memorial on 29 September 2008 with \$160,000 to be provided over four years on a one-off basis for maintenance.

Remove the Simpler Super tax hike

The government reports:

“Amendments to regulations on 2 October 2007 ensure Military Superannuation and Benefits Scheme members who are under preservation age and who take their pre-July 1999 member benefit will have the choice of applying all their available tax free amount against their lump sum (up to the amount of their pre-July 1999 benefit) or applying the proportioning rules.

Although some actions still need to be taken, and some are still in the process of implementation, I believe much has been done.”

Maintain a separate and properly funded Department of Veterans Affairs

The government has given assurances it will maintain a separate and well funded Department of Veterans Affairs.

Promises yet to be implemented

Help address the cost of pharmaceuticals for war caused disabilities

This is a major promise.

Funding has been provided in the 2009 Budget to determine the cost of the various ways of making pharmaceuticals free for the treatment of war-caused disabilities.

The review is planned to commence later in 2009 and will involve consultation with the veteran community.

Introduce the Commonwealth Dental Health Program

Disagreements in the Senate have delayed the implementation of this valuable scheme.

Establish a public register of ex-service officials and conduct regular surveys of them

A workable and acceptable system is still to be devised. Discussions continue.