



PALMER UNITED REUNITE THE NATION

Palmer United Party – Veterans Affairs Policy – August 2013

Introduction

PUP acknowledges that the self-harm and suicide rate of our serving and former members of the Australian Defence Forces is of great concern for the military and broader community.

The secretive nature of Veterans Affairs and other government departments regarding rates of self-harm and suicide for the people they are tasked to care for, makes it difficult to obtain exact figures – however, anecdotal evidence obtained from prominent members of the military family, ex-service organizations, legal representatives and workers who support and care for Diggers, suggests that there is a significant rise in the amount of former ADF members harming themselves or taking their own lives.

The following policy initiatives are designed to provide practical solutions to a broad range of well-known Veteran Affairs problems and injustices. By addressing these serious issues, PUP aims to deliver a fairer and more just approach to Veterans Affairs. PUP also believes that these policy initiatives will lead to a decrease in the instances of self-harm and suicide for former members of the Australian Defence Forces.

1) Fair indexation of Military Pensions / Superannuation and Backpay

- For more than 20 years, Australian veterans and ex-military personnel have fought a losing battle with all major political parties who have betrayed the defence community.
- Both Labor and LNP politicians, who every ANZAC Day get teary eyed and speak about the “ultimate sacrifice” that our ADF members paid, or were prepared to pay for our freedoms – are also the same politicians who year after year, cold bloodedly and deliberately, have failed to ensure that our retired diggers and their families – were fairly remunerated.
- While civilian aged pensions and politicians’ pensions were regularly increased in line with the Male Total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE) – military pensions were linked to the lower socio-economic indicator, the CPI, which has in the last 20 years plummeted in comparison.
- To fairly index our 54,000 retired defence force members’ pensions, (*note a further 3000 are still serving in the ADF*) it will cost Australia approximately \$100M over 4 years. To pay back the fair indexation of pensions *denied* for 20 years, to our 54,000 retired ADF members will cost between \$270M and \$540M
- So to right this injustice for our retired diggers, it will cost a maximum of \$640M over 4 years. Who is going argue against the expenditure of this money when Australia spends \$5.2B in foreign aid each year?
- It’s time for Australian politicians live *up* to the ANZAC Legend – not *off* it

2) Gold Card benefits expanded to Peace Keepers who served between 1988 to 2004 (MCRS)

- Members of the Australian military who enlisted and served between 1988 and 2004 are not eligible for the highest level of medical cover – a Gold Card - because according to the government, they served during a time of peace and (*unless they were peace keepers*) never faced “the enemy”. They have only now been entitled to the “White Card”.
- PUP will ensure that these military personnel and their spouses are entitled to apply and receive Gold Card Benefits, if their injuries are assessed at the equivalent of the standards that apply to the other Vet. Affairs schemes where the Gold Card is available.

3) Gold Card benefits automatically delivered to Veterans’ spouses after the death of their partners.

- The spouses of Veterans who have Gold Cards are forced into a bureaucratic battle, after the death of their partners, in order to transfer their husband/wife’s Gold Card benefits to themselves.
- PUP will ensure that all Gold Card Veterans’ spouses automatically receive Gold Card medical coverage and benefits - without having to prove to the government bureaucracy that their spouse’s death was “war caused”.

4) Vet Affairs minister solely responsible for Vet. Affairs (No other ministerial portfolios)

- Veterans and their legal representatives have reported substantial evidence of dysfunction and/or incompetence by the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- In order to provide a departmental leadership with the focus and capability to properly address the well-known deficiencies – PUP will ensure that the Department will be led by a stand alone Minister, who will ensure that there are enough frontline workers to ensure competent and timely service delivery to clients of Veterans affairs.
- *Note – Current Vet. Affairs Minister is also responsible for two other major ministerial portfolios i.e. Defence Science and Personnel - and Indigenous Health.*

5) Military and Public Service Compensation and Rehabilitation Legislative Standards Equalized

- The current legislation unfairly discriminates against members of the military when compared to members of the commonwealth public service.
- Legislative standards governing military compensation and rehabilitation, will be no less or greater than the legislative standards governing commonwealth public servants entitlement compensation and rehabilitation.
- Currently a higher standard of legislative proof applies to members of the military when compared with public service members. Members of the military have to satisfy the “Statement of Principle” legislative regime, that does not apply to commonwealth public servants.
- The “balance of probability” legislative standard will be used for both military and commonwealth employees to assess legal claims.

Note – if the unfair “Statement of Principle” regimes remains, then the Vet. who *substantially* complies with the factors linking their injury to their service will have their claim accepted

a) All outstanding illness and injury claims must be actioned and finalized by DVA prior to an ADF members discharge.

- All outstanding MSBS and MRCA claims must be actioned by DVA and decisions on compensation and rehabilitation to be finalized before discharge. Currently there are many examples where injured ADF members are discharged without knowing if and when medical treatment and compensation payments will be delivered in a timely manner.
- This causes Veterans to seek payments from Centrelink and places them under extreme financial hardship and leaves them without any government funded medical treatment.

b) Delays in processing Veterans' injury Claims eliminated.

- Time limits, similar to other commonwealth compensation schemes, will be imposed by legislation on the Department of Veterans Affairs. Currently there are no time limits for processing claims. This leaves families and Veterans waiting for many months for a decision to be made.

c) Incapacity Payment Rates to remain at 100%

- Currently incapacity rates for injured diggers are automatically reduced to 75% after 45 weeks. There is no reason why injured members of the military cannot be maintained at 100% by using their commonwealth superannuation pension. (MSBS – Military Superannuation Benefit Scheme)

d) Fair compensation for injury by abolishing "Off Setting"

- Commonwealth Public Servants compared with ADF members receive fairer compensation for injuries because they are not subject to "*Off Setting*" their payments.
- "*Off Setting*"- has been described by legal experts as, "*odious and complex*". It allows DVA injury assessors to ignore the sum total of officially diagnosed single injuries and place a fixed limit on dual or multiple compensation entitlements.
- The compensation limit is always less than the combined total of the individual injuries e.g. two injuries each of 10% incapacity - will often result in the ADF member only receiving a *partial* permanent impairment compensation payment equal to 10% - rather than the full 20% *permanent* impairment compensation payment.
- *Note – Under the current scheme once a Veteran receives the maximum payable sum for one injury i.e. Blindness. The same Veteran cannot receive an additional lump sum for subsequent injuries such as PTSD. This is in stark contrast to Commonwealth public servants who receive a separate payment for each injury sustained while working for the government.*

e) Tertiary Education Rehabilitation guaranteed to all former injured ADF members - regardless of rank.

- There are many examples of "Tertiary Education Rehabilitation" being denied to injured veterans because they were not "*high enough rank*" on medical discharge.
- Every injured ADF member with an accepted compensation claim, *regardless of rank*, will be given the opportunity to undertake tertiary education while receiving incapacity payments.