



## PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

OPENING OF THE RSL NATIONAL CONGRESS - CANBERRA -  
2 SEPTEMBER 1985

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

I AM DELIGHTED TO HAVE BEEN ABLE TO ACCEPT YOUR INVITATION TO ADDRESS THIS NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE RETURNED SERVICES LEAGUE.

SINCE COMING TO OFFICE TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO THERE HAS BEEN EXTENSIVE CONTACT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE LEAGUE WITH RESULTS WHICH I BELIEVE HAVE BEEN VERY BENEFICIAL TO BOTH SIDES. IT IS TIMELY NOW TO REVIEW WHERE WE STAND ON THE MAJOR ISSUES CONCERNING US.

AUSTRALIAN VETERANS HAVE OVER THE YEARS MADE A MAGNIFICENT CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY THROUGH NOT ONLY THE DEFENCE OF ITS BOUNDARIES AND ITS PEOPLE BUT THROUGH THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT IN MANY OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD. OUR VETERANS HAVE FOUGHT FOR DEMOCRACY, FOR FREEDOM AND FOR THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS OF NATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS. OUR VETERANS KNOW THE HORROR AND WASTE OF WAR; THEY ALSO KNOW THE NEED FOR A JUST AND HONOURABLE PEACE AROUND THE WORLD. THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THAT PEACE IS SOMETHING OF WHICH ALL AUSTRALIAN'S ARE JUSTIFIABLY PROUD.

AUSTRALIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE CAUSE OF PEACE HAS BEEN OUT OF PROPORTION TO ITS POPULATION AND ITS RESOURCES. I SOMETIMES WONDER HOW OUR COUNTRY WOULD HAVE PROGRESSED IF WE HAD NOT PROVIDED SO MANY YOUNG MEN BETWEEN 1914 AND 1918 IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR. AUSTRALIA LOST MORE MEN IN THAT WAR THAN THE UNITED STATES AT A TIME WHEN WE WERE BUILDING OUR NATION. THE LOSS OF 65,000 MEN WAS AN EXTRAORDINARY SACRIFICE IN A NATION OF UNDER 5 MILLION PEOPLE.

THERE ARE NOW ONLY 6,000 FIRST WORLD WAR DIGGERS ALIVE. THE LABOR GOVERNMENT WAS VERY PLEASED TO BE ABLE TO SEND EIGHT OF THEM TO THE CEREMONIES TO MARK THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ORIGINAL ANZAC DAY AND, LIKE YOU, I

WAS PROUD OF THE DIGNIFIED WAY IN WHICH THEY AND THEIR ONE-TIME TURKISH ADVERSARIES MET AFTER SO MANY YEARS.

SIMILARLY, MANY OF OUR BEST MEN WERE KILLED IN WORLD WAR II WHEN WE AGAIN SUFFERED GREAT LOSSES TO THE CAPACITY OF THE NATION. THE SUBSEQUENT LOSSES IN BOTH THE KOREAN AND VIETNAM WARS POSED STILL FURTHER STRAIN ON OUR PRECIOUS AND NECESSARILY LIMITED HUMAN RESOURCES.

THESE LOSSES SHOULD NEVER BE FORGOTTEN. SIMILARLY THOSE WHO SUFFERED INJURIES OR DISABILITIES IN THE PURSUIT OF PEACE SHOULD BE ACCORDED DUE RECOGNITION.

THE LABOR GOVERNMENT FIRMLY BELIEVES THAT WE SHOULD BE GENEROUS IN OUR TREATMENT TO THOSE WHO HAVE SUFFERED DISABILITIES BECAUSE OF THEIR PARTICIPATION IN WAR AND IN THE TREATMENT OF THE WIDOWS AND ORPHANS OF THOSE WHO HAVE DIED AS A RESULT OF WAR SERVICE.

I KNOW THAT SOME OF YOU MAY BELIEVE THAT MEASURES WE HAVE TAKEN, AS ANNOUNCED IN THE 14 MAY ECONOMIC STATEMENT, WERE NOT CONSISTENT WITH THAT OBJECTIVE.

I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT TO BE SO. WHAT THE GOVERNMENT HAS TRIED TO DO IS TO ENSURE THAT ANYONE WHO IS DISABLED AS A RESULT OF WAR SERVICE WILL HAVE HIS OR HER CLAIM FOR DISABILITY PENSION ACCEPTED WITH A MINIMUM OF FORMALITY AND DELAY AND BE PROVIDED WITH THE BEST POSSIBLE TREATMENT AND OTHER SERVICES. THIS GOES ALSO FOR WAR WIDOWS.

AT THE SAME TIME WE WOULD HAVE BEEN IRRESPONSIBLE IF WE HAD ALLOWED A SITUATION TO CONTINUE WHERE PENSIONS WERE BEING PAID VIRTUALLY TO ANYONE WHO CAME FORWARD TO LODGE A CLAIM SIMPLY ON THE BASIS THAT THEY WERE VETERANS OR THE WIDOWS OF VETERANS. THE END RESULT OF LETTING SUCH A SITUATION CONTINUE IS THAT THERE IS LESS MONEY AVAILABLE FOR PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY SERVICES AND TREATMENT FOR THOSE VETERANS WHO GENUINELY REQUIRE THEM. AS WITH ALL AREAS OF GOVERNMENT ACTIVITY AND RESPONSIBILITY, THERE IS NOT A 'BOTTOMLESS PIT' OF FUNDS. AND GOVERNMENT MUST ENSURE THAT FUNDS ARE DISTRIBUTED IN AN EFFICIENT AND EQUITABLE MANNER.

WHAT WE SOUGHT TO DO THROUGH THE LEGISLATION WHICH CAME INTO EFFECT ON 6 JUNE THIS YEAR (WITH THE SIX-MONTH SUNSET CLAUSE) WAS TO MAINTAIN A GENEROUS APPROACH TO DETERMINATION OF DISABILITY PENSION CLAIMS WHILE ENSURING THAT THE EXCESSES OF THE HIGH COURT'S O'BRIEN DECISION WERE ELIMINATED. THOSE WHOSE DISABILITIES OR DEATHS ARE THE RESULT OF WAR SERVICE SHOULD RECEIVE PROPER COMPENSATION. THAT POSITION IS, AND SHOULD ALWAYS BE, NON-NEGOTIABLE. A REASONABLE LEEWAY IN FAVOUR OF THE CLAIMANT SHOULD ALSO EXIST GIVEN THE

UNCERTAINTIES AS TO CAUSE IN MANY CASES AND THE MORAL CASE FOR GENEROUS TREATMENT. INDEED, THE AUSTRALIAN REPATRIATION SYSTEM REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST GENEROUS, IF NOT THE MOST GENEROUS, IN THE WORLD.

SOME AREAS OF THE EX-SERVICE COMMUNITY HAVE OBJECTED TO THE APPROACH WHICH WAS TAKEN FOLLOWING THE O'BRIEN DECISION. HOWEVER, WHEN THE AMENDING LEGISLATION WAS BROUGHT FORWARD EARLIER THIS YEAR THERE WAS BIPARTISAN SUPPORT FOR THE VIEW THAT THE PROVISIONS INTRODUCED INTO THE REPATRIATION ACT IN 1977 AS SUBSEQUENTLY INTERPRETED, PARTICULARLY IN THE O'BRIEN DECISION, WENT BEYOND THE LEVEL OF GENEROSITY THAT THE PARLIAMENT, AND INDEED MANY SECTIONS OF THE EX-SERVICE COMMUNITY, BELIEVED WAS REASONABLE.

I ACCEPT THE POINT THAT HAS BEEN MADE BY YOUR NATIONAL PRESIDENT, SIR WILLIAM KEYS, AND OTHERS THAT THERE WAS A GENUINE MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT CONSULTATION ON CHANGES TO THE LEGISLATION. I BELIEVE WE HAVE OVERCOME WHATEVER MISUNDERSTANDINGS AROSE BY ENGAGING IN A PROCESS OF FULL CONSULTATION WITH THE EX-SERVICE COMMUNITY, THROUGH ITS MAJOR ORGANISATIONS INCLUDING THE RSL AND THEIR REPRESENTATIVES, ON THE PROVISIONS OF THE VETERANS' ENTITLEMENTS BILL. I BELIEVE ALSO THAT WE CAN DRAFT THE BILL SO THAT BOTH THE RSL AND THE GOVERNMENT, AS THE REPRESENTATIVE OF TAXPAYERS, ARE LARGELY SATISFIED WITH ITS PROVISIONS AND THE GOVERNMENT CAN PUT TO THE PARLIAMENT A BILL WHICH MEETS THE NEEDS OF VETERANS WITHOUT GOING BEYOND THE BOUNDS OF COMMUNITY EQUITY AND ECONOMIC RESPONSIBILITY.

THERE HAS BEEN A GOOD DEAL OF CONSULTATION WITH SIR WILLIAM KEYS WHO HAS PUT FORWARD THE INTERESTS OF THE EX-SERVICE COMMUNITY WITH VIGOUR AND LOGIC. INDEED HIS ROLE HAS BEEN ONE TO WHICH I SHOULD LIKE TO PAY PARTICULAR TRIBUTE. JUDGE PAUL TOOSE HAS ALSO BEEN ADVISING THE RSL AND THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE DISCUSSION WITH HIM ON THE DETAILED PROVISIONS OF THE LEGISLATION. THERE COULD BE NO MORE EXTENSIVE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION THAN THE ONE WHICH HAS TAKEN PLACE ON THE VETERANS' ENTITLEMENT BILL.

I BELIEVE THAT THE CONSULTATIONS AND NEGOTIATIONS, AS FAR AS THE RSL AND THE GOVERNMENT ARE CONCERNED, HAVE BEEN ON THE BASIS OF FORMULATING THE BEST POSSIBLE LEGISLATION TO MEET THE NEEDS OF VETERANS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECONOMIC SITUATION AUSTRALIA CURRENTLY FACES.

I MAKE NO APOLOGY FOR SAYING THAT THE GOVERNMENT SOUGHT TO FIND SAVINGS IN THE VETERANS' AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO JUST AS I MAKE NO APOLOGY FOR SAYING THAT WE TRIED TO FIND SAVINGS IN ALL OTHER PORTFOLIOS. IT IS SURPRISING HOW MANY GROUPS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY HAVE SAID THAT THEY

HAVE BEEN SINGLED OUT IN THE MAY ECONOMIC STATEMENT FOR SPECIAL CUTBACKS. I CAN ASSURE YOU THAT THAT WAS NOT THE CASE - EITHER IN THE CASE OF VETERANS OR ANY OTHER GROUP.

BUT ALL AUSTRALIANS MUST REALISE THAT THE FUTURE OF OUR AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY DEPENDS UPON HAVING A SOUND ECONOMY WHICH PROVIDES SUFFICIENT GROWTH TO ENABLE MORE JOBS TO BE CREATED AND MORE FUNDS TO BE PROVIDED FOR THOSE AREAS WHICH JUSTIFY GREATER EXPENDITURE. IT IS NOT IN ANYONE'S INTEREST TO TURN A BLIND EYE TO AREAS OF EXCESSIVE OR UNNECESSARY EXPENDITURE WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY AREAS WHICH NEED MORE FUNDS AND WHEN WE MUST DO AS A NATION EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO ENSURE THAT WE DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN A SOUND ECONOMY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS. YOU AND SO MANY OF YOUR COMRADES FOUGHT AND DIED THAT WE, AS A FREE SOCIETY, SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO THIS.

AS A SOCIETY WE NEED TO MAINTAIN HIGH LEVELS OF PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT FOR ALL IN THE WORKING AGE GROUPS, ESPECIALLY FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE. IT WOULD BE A SAD IRONY IF THE SACRIFICES MADE BY OUR VETERANS WERE WASTED BECAUSE WE COULD NOT SUSTAIN A RESPONSIBLE SOCIETY IN WHICH ALL SECTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY RECEIVE A FAIR GO.

I SHALL NOT GO INTO DETAIL ABOUT THE PROVISIONS OF THE VETERANS' ENTITLEMENT BILL. CABINET STILL HAS TO CONSIDER IT.

I CAN ASSURE YOU, HOWEVER, THAT CABINET WILL TAKE FULL ACCOUNT OF THE VIEWS OF THE RSL AND THE DISCUSSIONS WHICH HAVE TAKEN PLACE WITH SIR WILLIAM KEYS AND JUDGE PAUL TOOSE ON THE BILL. THE INTENTION IS TO INTRODUCE THE BILL NEXT MONTH AND TO HAVE IT PASSED BEFORE THE PARLIAMENT RISES SO THAT IT CAN COME INTO EFFECT FROM 6 DECEMBER WHEN THE SUNSET CLAUSE ON THE AMENDMENTS TO SECTION 47 LAPSES.

MY GOVERNMENT IS ANXIOUS TO BRING STABILITY TO THE VETERANS' AFFAIRS AREAS BY ENSURING THAT THE LEGISLATION MEETS THE CRITERIA I HAVE MENTIONED, AND THAT THE DETERMINING SYSTEM WORKS QUICKLY, FAIRLY AND EFFICIENTLY.

I HAVE SPOKEN ABOUT THE LEGISLATION. THE LONG OVERDUE CHANGES TO THE DETERMINING SYSTEM THAT WE INTRODUCED ARE NOW MAKING A REAL IMPRESSION ON THE BACKLOGS AND SHOULD BE OPERATING AS INTENDED BY THE END OF THIS FINANCIAL YEAR.

WE ALSO WISH TO ENSURE THAT THE REPATRIATION HOSPITAL SYSTEM IS ABLE TO MAINTAIN A HIGH QUALITY OF CARE AND FITS INTO THE OVERALL HEALTH DELIVERY SYSTEMS OF THE STATES AND THE COMMUNITY GENERALLY.

MY GOVERNMENT ACTED QUICKLY, WHEN IT CAME TO OFFICE, TO IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF THE REPATRIATION GENERAL HOSPITALS. SENATOR GIETZELT COMMISSIONED A REVIEW OF THE REPATRIATION HOSPITAL SYSTEM BY A COMMITTEE LED BY DOCTOR IAN BRAND. THAT COMMITTEE'S REPORT HAS NOW BEEN RECEIVED AND ITS WIDE-RANGING RECOMMENDATIONS WARRANT, AND WILL RECEIVE, CAREFUL CONSIDERATION BY THE MINISTER AND THE GOVERNMENT.

THEY WILL BE ADDRESSED AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF THE COMMITMENT I GAVE IN THE NATIONAL POLICY SPEECH BEFORE LAST YEAR'S ELECTION "TO CONTINUE UPGRADING REPATRIATION HOSPITALS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF AN AGEING VETERANS COMMUNITY." - THAT WAS A FIRM, UNEQUIVOVAL PLEDGE AND ONE WHICH, IF I KNOW THE RSL, THERE IS NO WAY IT WILL LET US FORGET. I WILL WELCOME YOUR VIGILANCE - BUT IT WILL NOT BE NECESSARY. THAT COMMITMENT IS BEING FULLY IMPLEMENTED.

ONE ASPECT OF THE BRAND REPORT WHICH IS NOW PLACED FAIRLY AND SQUARELY BEFORE US ALL, IS THE QUESTION OF INTEGRATION OF THE REPATRIATION GENERAL HOSPITAL SYSTEM WITH THE HOSPITAL FACILITIES PROVIDED IN EACH STATE.

CLEARLY VERY CAREFUL PLANNING WILL BE NEEDED FOR INTEGRATION TO BE A SUCCESS.

INTEGRATION SIMPLY MEANS WORKING CLOSELY WITH THE STATE SYSTEM TO GUARANTEE THE BEST POSSIBLE TREATMENT WITHOUT DUPLICATING SERVICES.

THE PRECISE FORM THE INTEGRATION PROCESS WILL TAKE IN THE FUTURE IS STILL TO BE DETERMINED. BUT IT WILL MEAN THAT CLOSER CO-ORDINATION AND CONSULTATION WILL BE REQUIRED BETWEEN STATE AUTHORITIES AND THE REPATRIATION GENERAL HOSPITALS. IT WILL ALSO MEAN, ESPECIALLY WITH AN AGEING VETERAN POPULATION, THAT A PARTICULAR EFFORT SHOULD BE MADE TO PROVIDE SERVICES, INCLUDING HOSPITAL SERVICES, CLOSER TO HOME.

THAT SAID, I CAN ASSURE YOU THAT THERE WILL CONTINUE TO BE REPATRIATION HOSPITALS OPERATING AS AN IMPORTANT AND VISIBLE ELEMENT IN THE OVERALL TREATMENT FOR VETERANS AND WAR WIDOWS FOR MANY YEARS TO COME.

AT THE SAME TIME AS THE BRAND REVIEW TEAM WAS WORKING ON ITS REPORT, THE GOVERNMENT WAS SHOWING ITS GENUINE COMMITMENT TO THE ACUTE MEDICAL AND SURGICAL NEEDS OF VETERANS BY UNDERTAKING A MAJOR BUILDING AND RE-DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IN THE REPATRIATION GENERAL HOSPITALS.

I COULD QUOTE A RANGE OF PROJECTS AND IMPRESIVE SOUNDING

DOLLAR TOTALS AND LIST EACH AND EVERY ONE OF THE MANY PROJECTS UNDER WAY OR IN THE PIPE-LINE. RATHER THAN DO THAT, I WOULD MENTION THAT IN THE PAST MONTH IT HAS BEEN ONE OF MY MORE PLEASANT TASKS TO SPEAK AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW SURGICAL OPERATING SUITES AT DAW PARK ON 1 AUGUST, AND AT THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW RADIOLOGY DEPARTMENT AND REFURBISHED WARD AT HEIDELBERG ON 29 AUGUST.

AND THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING, I EXPECT THAT THERE WILL BE MORE OFFICIAL OPENING ACTIVITIES IN THE NOT TOO FAR DISTANT FUTURE.

CRITICISM WAS EXPRESSED IN SOME QUARTERS WHEN I ANNOUNCED THAT THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL WOULD COME WITHIN THE VETERANS' AFFAIRS PORTFOLIO. BUT THERE CAN BE LITTLE DOUBT THAT THE WAR MEMORIAL HAS BENEFITTED FROM THE TRANSFER, AND THAT THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING IS IN THE CONTENTS OF LAST MONTH'S BUDGET.

A CONSIDERABLE INCREASE IN STAFF WILL BE PROVIDED DURING THE CURRENT FINANCIAL YEAR. AN INCREASED PROGRAM OF CONSERVATION AND CONTROL OF COLLECTIONS COSTING ALMOST \$2M OVER THREE YEARS WILL BE INTRODUCED. A NEW STORAGE FACILITY WILL BE BOUGHT, AND FUNDING WILL BE PROVIDED FOR DOCUMENTATION AND CATALOGUE OF THE PRINTED COLLECTION. AND PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL, WE HAVE AGREED TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW STAFF ACCOMMODATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT BUILDING. THIS WILL COST APPROXIMATELY \$6.5M AND WILL BE COMPLETED IN 1988. THE NEW BUILDING WILL THEN TAKE PRESSURE FROM THE MAIN BUILDING OF THE WAR MEMORIAL WHICH IS NEEDED FOR DISPLAY AND EXHIBITION PURPOSES.

THE AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL IS ONE OF THE GREAT INSTITUTIONS OF AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY. IT PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE SACRIFICES AND THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF AUSTRALIAN MEN AND WOMEN IN WARS AND THE PURSUIT OF PEACE. I AM VERY PLEASED THAT WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PROVIDE THESE ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO ENABLE THE WAR MEMORIAL TO FULFIL THE SYMBOLIC ROLE IT PLAYS IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY.

EVEN MORE RECENT THAN THE BUDGET WAS THE TABLING IN PARLIAMENT ON 22 AUGUST OF THE FINAL REPORT OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE USE AND EFFECTS OF CHEMICAL AGENTS ON AUSTRALIAN PERSONNEL IN VIETNAM.

THE REPORT'S CENTRAL FINDING IS THAT THE CHEMICAL AGENTS, BY AND LARGE, HAD NO ADVERSE EFFECTS ON AUSTRALIAN PERSONNEL. THE GOVERNMENT ACCEPTS THAT THE CASE FOR A LINK BETWEEN AGENT ORANGE AND HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG VIETNAM VETERANS HAS NOT BEEN ESTABLISHED.

HOWEVER, BOTH THE GOVERNMENT AND THE RSL NEED TO BE

AWARE THAT THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERINGS OF THE VIETNAM VETERANS ARE REAL ENOUGH, WHETHER OR NOT THEY WERE CAUSED BY AGENT ORANGE. MR JUSTICE EVATT IS CLEARLY STATING THAT THE MAIN TASK, CARING FOR VIETNAM VETERANS, IS STILL CONTINUING.

I CAN ASSURE ALL OF YOU HERE TODAY THAT WE WILL BE LOOKING VERY CAREFULLY AT THE REPORT'S RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THIS GOVERNMENT'S DEMONSTRATED COMMITMENT TO PROVIDING OPTIMUM CARE FOR THE VETERANS OF ALL WARS.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR GOVERNMENT ATTACHES GREAT IMPORTANCE TO SECURING CONDITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL PEACE, SECURITY AND STABILITY. WE ARE DEDICATED TO PERSUADING THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, AND PARTICULARLY THE SUPERPOWERS, OF THE NEED FOR REAL PROGRESS IN THE TASK OF GENUINE ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT. THIS IS REFLECTED IN OUR DETERMINED PURSUIT OF A COMPREHENSIVE TEST BAN TREATY, AN INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENT ON CHEMICAL WEAPONS AND IN OUR PRESENT ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN THE NON-PROLIFERATION REVIEW CONFERENCE IN GENEVA. AUSTRALIAN VIEWS HAVE ALSO BEEN PUT DIRECTLY TO THE SUPERPOWERS.

CLOSER TO HOME, THE RECENT AGREEMENT - FOLLOWING AN AUSTRALIAN INITIATIVE AT THE SOUTH PACIFIC FORUM TO ESTABLISH A PACIFIC NUCLEAR FREE ZONE WAS A MAJOR ADVANCE IN THE CAUSE OF PEACE.

AT THE SAME TIME WE APPRECIATE THE REALITY OF AN UNSTABLE WORLD AND AS A GOVERNMENT HAVE ACCEPTED THE RESPONSIBILITY OF MAINTAINING EFFICIENT, WELL-MANNED, WELL EQUIPPED AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE FORCES. INDEED THE LABOR GOVERNMENT REGARDS EXPENDITURE ON NATIONAL DEFENCE NEEDS AS AMONG THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL OF ITS NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES. THE 3.5 PER CENT ANNUAL INCREASE IN REAL DEFENCE EXPENDITURE THAT THE LABOR GOVERNMENT HAS MAINTAINED SINCE COMING TO OFFICE IS A CLEAR MEASURE OF THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH WE HAVE DISCHARGED THOSE RESPONSIBILITIES.

MY GOVERNMENT HAS ALSO BEEN ESPECIALLY MINDFUL OF THE PARTICULAR IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING AUSTRALIA'S ALLIANCE RELATIONSHIPS. WE ARE TOTALLY COMMITTED TO ENSURING THE HEALTH OF THOSE RELATIONSHIPS WHICH WE CONSIDER VITAL TO THE MAINTENANCE OF PEACE IN OUR WORLD. THE SUCCESS WITH WHICH WE HAVE DONE SO WAS RECENTLY ACKNOWLEDGED AT A SPECIAL MEETING OF THE ASIA SOCIETY ON 17 JULY BY US DEFENCE SECRETARY WEINBERGER WHEN HE SAID THE AUSTRALIA/US ALLIANCE HAD "RARELY BEEN STRONGER".

I KNOW THE RETURNED SERVICES LEAGUE APPRECIATES THE IMPORTANCE OF THESE MATTERS FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY. THE LEAGUE HAS A MOST IMPORTANT ROLE IN KEEPING THESE PERSPECTIVES TO THE FORE IN OUR COMMUNITY. WE WELCOME THAT ROLE, PARTICULARLY WHERE IT IS EXERCISED ON YOUR BEHALF IN THE RESPONSIBLE AND EFFECTIVE MANNER OF YOUR PRESIDENT SIR WILLIAM KEYS.

ACCORDINGLY, I HAVE MUCH PLEASURE IN DECLARING OPEN THIS 70TH ANNUAL NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE LEAGUE.

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