



PRIME MINISTER

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SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
RSL NATIONAL CONGRESS
SURFERS PARADISE - 31 AUGUST 1987

Your Excellency, Sir Walter Campbell,
Sir William Keys,
Sir Colin Hines,
Sir Albert Abbot,
John Howard,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for your invitation to address the RSL National Congress again.

On July 11, my Government was returned to office following one of the most difficult and challenging periods of economic restructuring that Australia has undergone.

The disastrous drop in the prices of our exports during 1985-86 meant that Australia had to face tough economic decisions if we were to guarantee a prosperous future.

I said before and during the campaign, and I say again, that we will not shirk the hard decisions that are essential if we are to ensure such a future. It is clear our economic policies are taking effect. Australia is meeting the challenge of reconstruction. But we are far from finished. This Government is determined to fulfill its electoral mandate to continue that task of building a more productive and competitive Australia.

Despite the restraint on Government spending which the national economic challenge has imposed, however, I think we have good reason to be proud of our record in defending and enhancing the rights of Australia's veterans.

Most of our young people have never experienced the horrors of war. But no Australian should be allowed to forget the sacrifices made by ex-servicemen and women to ensure freedom for future generations - for without those sacrifices, Australia might not be free today.

We have increased appropriations to the Veterans' Affairs portfolio from \$2.5 billion in 1982-83 to \$3.8 billion in 1986-87 - an increase in real terms of 37 per cent over our time in office. The veterans' allocation now represents 5 per cent of the total Commonwealth Budget.

In reviewing that record, let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to the former Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Senator Arthur Gietzelt. During the four years he served as Minister, Arthur made what can only be called an outstanding contribution to the veterans of Australia.

His achievement is not to be measured solely by measuring the size of his department's budget. Arthur concentrated on the quality as well as the quantity of services provided by the Government to veterans.

When Arthur took on the job, an early priority was to improve the standard of care in repatriation hospitals throughout Australia. This was essential if we are to cope with the sharp increase in the number of veterans who, as they age, will need treatment at these hospitals.

Revitalising the six major Repatriation Hospitals led to the provision of more than \$85 million since 1983-84 for new buildings.

Another \$28 million was provided for specialised equipment at the hospitals.

This means first class health care continues to be available to every veteran who needs it.

We are also trying to improve the ease with which veterans can gain access to our repatriation services. Several new information services, such as toll-free telephone lines, simplified information brochures and forms, and a customer liaison service, have been introduced to improve the quality of contact between veterans and their Department.

A second major achievement of the Government under Arthur Gietzelt's administration of this portfolio was the most comprehensive reform of repatriation legislation in nearly seven decades. This culminated in the proclamation of the Veterans' Entitlements Act on 22 May 1986. This Act simplified what had become an obstacle course that made life unnecessarily difficult for everyone concerned.

A few other features of the record deserve highlighting.

Aged and Extended Care Units have been set up at all repatriation general hospitals to assess patients' needs and refer them to appropriate treatment and community services. The aim is to ensure that patients can stay in their own homes as long as possible rather than being forced to call on institutional care before it is really necessary.

A nursing home leave scheme and respite care for patient carers have also been introduced. New arrangements for dental, optometrical and physiotherapy treatment have further improved service delivery in these areas.

We are ensuring that funding for the Australian War Memorial reflects the need to maintain an accurate record of Australians at war. Funding has almost trebled since 1983-84, to \$9 million.

To sum up, therefore, I would reiterate that Arthur Gietzelt's strong record of achievement in this area over the last four years reflects the Government's very real commitment to veterans.

That commitment is of course shared by the new Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Ben Humphreys.

Many of you will know by now that Ben Humphreys is a Queenslander, the son of a TPI pensioner now deceased, and a member of the Colmslie RSL branch in Brisbane. He is also Vice-President of the Queensland Branch of the Totally and Permanently Disabled Soldiers' Association of Australia.

Ben served with the fleet air arm in 1953-54 as a national serviceman, so he brings a knowledge of the services and service conditions to his new job.

He also has been a very effective Member of Parliament since 1977, including as Government Whip since 1983. Although this is his first portfolio, I know Ben is very well equipped to take up this new job and to continue the very close relationship that has been established between this Government and Australia's veterans community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In the Labor Party's policy statement at the recent election, we clearly stated that under a Labor Government veterans would be guaranteed the secure and dignified life they deserve.

I am acutely aware that there has been a great deal of apprehension and feelings of insecurity in the veterans' community since the handing down of a Federal Court judgement which implied that the TPI pension should not be paid for the whole of a veteran's life.

Cabinet considered a submission from Ben Humphreys on this issue last week and we determined that this interpretation of the Act must not be allowed to stand.

Our view is that the TPI pension and the intermediate rate of disability pension are just and deserved compensation for those disabled as a result of their war service. The Government agrees with the veterans' community that the TPI and intermediate rates of disability pensions should be paid for life.

Therefore, my Government will introduce into Parliament an amendment to the Veterans' Entitlements Act and the Seamen's War Pensions and Allowances Act to ensure that Special - that is, TPI - and Intermediate rate pensions, once granted, continue to be payable indefinitely, except where there is evidence of fraud, significant improvement in health or resumption of employment.

I believe this decision will be applauded by veterans and indeed by the Australian community, as a fair one and one which will enshrine in law the approach that all governments have taken to these pensions since they were introduced.

The decision reflects this Government's continuing efforts to protect and enhance the rights of veterans so they receive what is due to them as compensation for their service to the nation.

This Government commitment was manifested in a number of specific promises to veterans which we made during the recent election campaign.

The first of these was the promise that we would maintain a separate Department of Veterans' Affairs - a promise which we have kept as part of the massive reorganising of our departmental structures which I announced after the election.

We also promised to extend full medical and hospital treatment to all returned ex-servicewomen from the Second World War. This initiative will benefit some 939 women not currently eligible.

A Department of Veterans' Affairs study in 1985 showed that many of these women are living in most difficult financial circumstances. They were discriminated against in pay and conditions during their war service; they are on average older than their male counterparts; more than a third of them have never married; and many of them are now elderly, alone and in poor health.

I must stress, however, that extending this benefit to these ex-servicewomen is on the understanding that it reflects their special circumstances. It is not to be taken as a precedent by other groups. Indeed the Government has received assurances to this effect from the RSL on behalf of the ex-service community generally.

A further initiative announced during the election campaign was the commitment to provide special compensation to surviving Australian ex-servicemen illegally interned in Nazi concentration camps for protracted periods during the Second World War.

This would be a personal compensation payment of \$10,000 per person, given in recognition of the fact that these POW's were detained illegally and subjected to brutal treatment very much harsher than anything permitted under the terms of the Geneva Convention.

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Also announced in the election was the Government's plans to expand the Repatriation Artificial Limb and Appliance Centre in Albury, as part of our continuing national improvement program to ensure that appropriate services are available.

At a different level, I believe that one of the most significant events for the veterans' community in 1987 will be the Welcome Home March for Vietnam Veterans' in October. My colleagues and I have expressed our strong support of this march.

In addition to a grant we have made to assist the organisers, we will also provide transport for many disabled and disadvantaged Vietnam veterans to give them the opportunity to attend the welcome home parade.

Many thousands of Australian Vietnam veterans, including nurses, will be joined in the march by their American and New Zealand comrades.

More than 200,000 people attended a similar event for United States Vietnam Veterans in Chicago last year. I urge as many of you as possible to attend on 3 October, because recognition by veterans of other conflicts of the sacrifices made by our Vietnam veterans is integral to wider community recognition.

I firmly believe that the October parade will be the culmination of a long process of reconciliation and community acceptance of its obligations to the veterans of Vietnam.

I believe we must honestly acknowledge that our involvement in Vietnam did cause deep divisions in the Australian community.

But whatever our individual views on the merits of Australian involvement, we must equally acknowledge the commitment, courage and integrity of our armed forces who served in Vietnam.

No one should ever have questioned those characteristics - nor should anyone ever have questioned our community obligations to the Vietnam veterans.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Government is confident that the excellent relationship we share with the RSL and other ex-service organisations will continue, for that relationship is a crucial part of the cooperative spirit we have fostered within this nation since 1993.

The effectiveness of the Government's veterans' affairs programs depends on our working together and maintaining a mutual exchange of information. With Ben Humphreys I look forward to working again with your National President and Executive in the years ahead.

Sir William Roys' contribution to this work of serving the veterans' community deserves special mention. He and I have built up a close working relationship which has certainly kept me in touch with the needs and opinions of veterans, and which has I believe kept him abreast of the thinking of the Government on issues affecting veterans.

The Government has a great respect for your expertise and experience. I know that in the future you will not only continue to alert us to problems as they arise, but that you will come forward with constructive suggestions as to effective solutions.

That can only be of benefit to every veteran.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have not dwelt in any detail on the Government's new defence strategy as articulated in the recent White Paper.

All veterans and others with an interest in defence policy will however recognise that document as the most effective and most farsighted strategy ever formulated for the fulfilment of the most fundamental responsibility of any Australian Government - the defence and security of our nation.

It is a further matter of pride for me that my Government has maintained a warm and constructive relationship with the United States.

Indeed I was gratified recently during the visit of senior members of the US Administration to be told by them that the alliance relationship between our two countries had never been closer.

At the same time, my Government has opened new channels of communication with the Soviet Union, laying the foundations of a businesslike and mutually beneficial relationship, despite the profound political differences which will continue to separate us.

Within the framework of those relationships, Australia has consistently tried to use whatever influence it has to ensure viable, verifiable treaty arrangements which may build a more stable, more peaceful world.

It is a matter of great importance therefore that the United States and the Soviet Union appear to be on the verge of an agreement to reduce their arsenals of Intermediate Nuclear Forces.

This would be the first time since the nuclear genie was let loose in 1945 that two nations have agreed to reduce the number of their weapons. Previous agreements have limited the rate of increase of offensive nuclear weapons, but not achieved actual cuts.

No one understands better than veterans the true horrors of war.

Perhaps then, no one should welcome more than veterans the imminent possibility of such an agreement which may allow the world at last to divert its resources away from the creation of forces of destruction towards the creation of the means to feed, clothe and shelter our fellow human beings.

I speak to you therefore as the leader of the Government committed to a strong and effective defence, and to the cause of peace.

We are a Government which fully recognises the important contribution which veterans have made to the security of our country in time of conflict and peril.

I wish to assure you today that those convictions will continue to guide our policies in the period ahead.
