



PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
1988 NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE
RETURNED SERVICES LEAGUE
CANBERRA - 5 SEPTEMBER 1988**

Like its predecessors, this 1988 Bicentennial Congress of the Returned Services League is a proud and significant event.

It reminds us of the great ANZAC tradition - the tradition of selflessness and courage demonstrated by our servicemen and women in the past.

And it reminds us of the RSL's tradition of service, both to veterans and to the community at large.

For these reasons the Government was proud to respond to the RSL's request for financial assistance to stage this Congress.

But this Congress is particularly salient given that it is the last one over which Sir William Keys will preside.

I will be delivering some specific words of thanks to Bill at his farewell dinner on Thursday, so at this point I will make the brief, but nonetheless heartfelt, comment that his leadership, his consultative style, and let's be frank, his hard bargaining have substantially helped ensure the RSL remains the respected national organisation it has always been. Bill has truly set a high standard of achievement for his successor.

That combination of hard bargaining and constructive dialogue is important.

We, in Government, have sought to ensure that veterans get the support and the services they justly deserve. And we have worked hard to ensure that the scarce veterans' funds which we have at our disposal are directed to veterans, where they should be directed, and not at bureaucrats or other elements of administration. And we will continue to do so, in cooperation with the RSL.

Because if there is one thing of which the RSL can be sure, it is this. This Government honours its commitments. This Government honours our veterans. And this Government is prepared to work constructively with those prepared to work constructively with us.

This does not of course mean we agree on every issue. It means that where we have legitimate differences, as we no doubt will, we work to resolve them not in a spirit of confrontation but of cooperation.

It is in this context that I say I trust that the outstanding record of achievement which is Bill Keys' legacy will continue to mark the partnership between the Labor Government and the RSL.

What must impress anyone surveying Australia in its Bicentennial Year is the very great respect with which the nation regards its veterans community and its currently serving members of the armed forces.

This magnificent Defence Force Academy is a case in point - it has already established a sound reputation for equipping cadets for the wide range of roles which modern defence service personnel discharge.

I am impressed too by the continuing willingness in the community to commemorate publicly the sacrifices and the achievements of our Defence Forces.

This year the Commonwealth Government has proudly supported a number of initiatives in this regard.

Next December, the new national memorial to the Australian Army will be dedicated on Anzac Parade.

The Australian gas industry donated an Eternal Flame to the Australian War Memorial as a Bicentennial gift to the nation. This was lit at the 1988 Anzac Day Dawn Service, on the same day as the Governor-General, Sir Ninian Stephen unveiled a new statue of the Gallipoli hero, John Simpson Kirkpatrick, with his donkey.

The Chapel from the Changi Prisoner of War Camp has been reconstructed in the Royal Military College at Duntroon, and dedicated as the National Prisoner of War Memorial to honour all Australian POW's of all services, in all areas.

Such memorials display a new maturity pervading our national attitude.

And most strikingly, this maturity is reflected in the recognition at last extended to our Vietnam veterans. I have consistently maintained that regardless of opinions of the rights or wrongs of that war one cannot doubt the courage and integrity of those Australians whose task it was to fight it.

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For this reason I attended with pride the 'Welcome Home' Parade held in Sydney last October. For the same reason I was pleased to see the first national Vietnam Veterans Day held on 18 August, the 22nd anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan.

Equally, one cannot fail to be impressed by the way in which Australians show their preparedness to honour the war dead of other nations. After the Turkish Government agreed to the dedication of Anzac Cove in Gallipoli in 1985, the decision was taken to unveil in Canberra a memorial to Kemal Ataturk, father of the Turkish nation and our one-time enemy.

Later this month, plaques are to be unveiled at Garden Island on Sydney Harbour, on the initiative of the Naval Historical Society. These plaques will recall the memory of the Japanese crewmen killed in the midget submarine attack in 1942.

I understand this decision has upset some people, including RSL members. Let me point out that the decision to erect the memorial was not taken by the Government. However I think the plaques attest to our capacity - our maturity - not just to honour those who fought but also to let time heal the wounds of war so we can concentrate on the new demands of peace.

Side by side with this new maturity, Australians are continuing to demonstrate their compassion and their capacity to care for their fellow citizens who have served in time of war - a capacity the Australian community has displayed at least since the establishment of the Repatriation System seventy years ago.

Just as importantly, Australians are continuing to show their capacity to respond to the changing needs of veterans.

My Government has good reason to be proud of its achievements in delivering new and improved services to Australia's veteran community.

In the last election campaign. I promised that we would not abolish the Department of Veteran's Affairs but would retain it as a separate ministry to cater for the special needs of the veterans' community.

As you know, we are retaining the ministry and an independent department and I believe that under the capable administration of my colleague Ben Humphreys it continues to perform a valuable service.

In the last election I also promised two specific initiatives requested by the RSL.

These were first, to extend full medical and hospital treatment to all returned servicewomen of the Second World War; and second, to provide special compensation to surviving Australian servicemen illegally interned in German concentration camps for a protracted period during World War II.

Both commitments were honoured in our first post-election budget.

Also in the last election, I promised to refer to the VEA Monitoring Committee the question of higher compensation for full General Rate pensioners whose disabilities have worsened after age 65 or retirement.

We not only referred, we have acted.

Last month's Budget introduced a new category of benefit - the Extreme Disablement Adjustment, which will be paid as a supplement to the General Rate of pension.

The combined payments will be at 150 per cent of the General Rate for many veterans over the age of 65 who do not receive a T and PI pension but who are severely incapacitated as a result of active service.

It is yet another demonstration, and an important one, of this Government's commitment to protecting the legitimate interests of the Australian veterans' community.

I was particularly pleased that we could introduce this new measure while Bill was still President of the RSL, as he has been championing this personally for many years.

More generally the Government is giving full and sympathetic consideration to the other 57 recommendations of the VEA Monitoring Committee. The Government has taken decisions on all but 20 of those recommendations. Those 20 are still under examination. But of the 38 considered to date only four recommendations have not been accepted - a fair batting average for any report!

These initiatives build upon a substantial record of achievement, not least in respect of veterans health services.

A major public works program over the past five years, at a cost of more than \$92 million, has continued the expansion and modernisation of Repatriation hospitals.

Aged and Extended Care units have been established in all States to assess patients and refer them to the most appropriate form of treatment or care.

We have also joined with the South Australian Government and Flinders University to locate the world's first Chair of Palliative Care at Daw Park Repatriation General Hospital in Adelaide.

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Another initiative in which I take particular interest is the Joint Ventures scheme - an innovative program which helps veterans and war widows stay in their homes, while maintaining their independence.

The number of projects approved under this scheme hit the 200 mark in June this year - a measure of its great success.

But now we need to go further to ensure that the Repatriation system continues to deliver the care that veterans deserve.

As the number of veterans over the age of 75 and the number of war widows rises, their need for medical and hospital services will inevitably rise.

In looking to the future we will ensure that their need for effective, easily accessible, high-quality hospital and health care is met.

And it is important to appreciate that even now those services are delivered not just by repatriation hospitals alone: over half our veterans receive hospital care in community rather than repatriation hospitals.

This is hardly surprising.

Over 70 per cent of veterans in the three Eastern States live more than 15 kilometres away from their nearest Repatriation Hospital. In Tasmania it is 60 per cent; in South Australia and Western Australia, 45 per cent respectively.

Effective integration of the Repatriation and State hospital systems will not simply allow best use to be made of the increasingly complex hospitals infrastructure. It will also give veterans better choice, better service, greater convenience.

We have approached State Premiers about this issue, stressing the Government's concern to obtain priority hospital access for veterans and war widows, and to maintain the high quality health care they require.

We are aiming to integrate repatriation hospitals with State health systems by 1 July 1995, or earlier if satisfactory arrangements can be made sooner.

But let me repeat here in this Congress the assurances that I have already given the RSL in writing that the Government will not proceed if the Returned Services League has reasonable cause for dissatisfaction with the arrangements that are proposed. This is a commitment on which you can rely. And to back that commitment we have arranged that there be the fullest consultations with the veterans community, led by the RSL, as we enter the necessary negotiations with the States.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is another outstanding matter of concern to the RSL on which a decision is imminent.

We have announced our intention to transfer the mortgage portfolio of the Defence Service Homes Corporation to the private sector.

The negotiations are now well advanced and I want to tell you, today, that the deal we are cutting is a good one for veterans.

No major benefits will be lost for those currently eligible or serving out their qualifying period. Indeed there will be significant enhancements.

For new mortgages, the ten month wait for funds will go and you will have access to commercial top up funds from the financial institution involved without additional fees and charges. This is in addition to the improvements of last year which ensure that when you move you can transfer your DSH mortgage to the new property.

As you know the Government also has had under review the question of home ownership assistance arrangements for recruits to the forces after May 1985.

We expect to be able to announce decisions shortly.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have concentrated today mostly on matters of direct relevance to the veterans' community. But I know you have a continuing interest in broader matters of Government policy.

I am proud that in a time of very great international economic and political change, and not least change in our own region, Australia is successfully adapting to meet the new challenges of the late twentieth century.

Australia plays a full and active role in the diplomacy of the region. We are building our defence self-reliance to boost our capacity to protect the broad strategic interest of the West.

We are modernising our defence forces - through, for example, building new submarines and frigates here in Australia. And we are working hard to increase our defence cooperation with our regional friends.

There is not the time to develop any of these themes in detail.

But I do want to highlight with pride one aspect of our defence activities - our contribution to the United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group.

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The 350-strong peacekeeping force, drawn from 23 countries, will observe and report any breaches of the ceasefire agreement without becoming involved in any armed conflict.

Australia has an excellent record of involvement in peacekeeping forces around the world. We are showing our capacity to bolster and to defend peace. Our contribution in Iran-Iraq is a credit to us as a nation and to Australia's defence forces.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As all of you know, Members of Parliament are already occupying their new and permanent Parliament House on Capital Hill.

You probably don't know that one of the very first ceremonial functions performed in the House of Representatives and Senate Chambers related to the RSL.

I had the pleasure of moving a motion, which was passed unanimously by the House, expressing the thanks of Parliament to all those organisations, within Australia and overseas, which provided gifts now adorning the new building.

One of the most striking of those gifts is the RSL's - the polished granite fountain surmounted by the symbolic image of four military caps - the army slouch hat, the flat topped navy hat, the airforce forage cap and the veil of the nursing corps.

Inscribed on this fountain are the words: "Look around you. These are the things they believed in". As the visitor looks around he or she will see our great national institutions of democracy, justice, art and learning - truly the things Australia's servicemen and women believed in, and for which many of them died.

Seeing that Parliament has unanimously expressed its thanks for this and the other gifts, it is a pleasure to be able to pass on those thanks to you personally and to assure you that its striking message will not be forgotten in Parliament House.

I wish you well in your Congress deliberations. I sincerely hope that the process of consultation and discussion that has been so carefully fostered by Sir William Keys will continue - it has been of great benefit to all veterans since the Labor Government took office. It is in the interests of veterans and the community at large that we build on these most recent achievements into the next quarter of a century.
