



PRIME MINISTER

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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**SPEECH FOR THE PRIME MINISTER
OPENING OF NEW THEATRE BLOCK
R.G.H. CONCORD - 7 MARCH 1990**

Ladies and gentlemen

The planning for this new theatre block at the Concord Repatriation Hospital began in 1983 - an important year of course for my Government as well as for the Concord Repatriation Hospital. I am very pleased to be here as Prime Minister to mark the successful culmination of the project.

I firmly believe that the Australian community would want any Australian Government to recognise in practical ways like this the debt which Australia owes to its veterans.

I say this despite the fact that today, 18 years after the withdrawal of Australian troops from Vietnam, 50 years since our troops were engaged in World War II, and 75 years since the landing at Anzac Cove, there are some in the ex-service community who express concerns about whether the repatriation system is in jeopardy.

Some wonder whether care and compassion for veterans is waning with the passage of time, as more and more young Australians, not having first or even second-hand experience of war, take on responsibility for veterans' care.

I want to address those concerns today and in so doing place on record my Government's position on the future care of veterans.

Ladies and gentlemen

I am talking to you, of course, in the midst of an election campaign. But I do not intend to talk politics today. I would like to think that the question of our debt as a country to our veterans is beyond Party politics. What I wish to do, therefore, is to speak only in a positive way about our commitments as a Government, commitments to the veteran which I believe would reflect the wish of all Australians.

6040

Australia is a secure country for today's generation in large part because of the sacrifice made in the past by our veterans. Of course we must never slacken in our efforts to remind young Australians of the achievements of our service and ex-service men and women. And we must always keep alive the fundamental values for which they were prepared to die.

But I strongly believe that these are messages which will be quickly and readily recognised and understood by young people.

If attendance by young people at Anzac Day ceremonies throughout Australia, and visits to Australian war graves overseas are any measure, there seems if anything to be a resurgence of interest. And the number of people visiting the Australian War Memorial each year, many of them of a generation not exposed to war, is not dwindling.

It is in large part for its educational potential that I agreed without hesitation to send a group of Gallipoli veterans, accompanied by a small party of war widows and, importantly, Junior Legatees, back to Turkey for this year's 75th Anniversary of the landing at Anzac Cove.

As well as honoring that fine group of Australian veterans - and I'm delighted to say that we have some of them, along with their tour leader, Bill Hall, with us here today - the visit to the Gallipoli Peninsula will enable the Junior Legatee group to pass on first hand observations to their contemporaries.

I do believe that projects such as the Gallipoli pilgrimage and other initiatives enjoy widespread community support. Australians, I am sure, also support our decision to index all major pensions and allowances for veterans so that their real value is not eroded. The same is true of the increases, over and above indexation, to bring the rate of service pension to 25 per cent of average weekly earnings. The overall real increase in funding for veterans of 4.8 per cent each year of this decade represents a commitment made by the Government on behalf of the community as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In Veterans Affairs, as in all other areas of Government activity, there is a place for continuity and there is a place for change.

I know that continuity in the administration of Veterans' programs is an issue about which the Veterans' community feels strongly. I wish to repeat, therefore, what I said last year when opening a new ward block at Heidelberg Hospital - my Government is absolutely committed to maintaining a separate Department of Veterans' Affairs, answerable to its own Minister.

Further, on behalf of the Government, I guarantee the retention of a full time Repatriation Commission with at least three Commissioners - one of whom is nominated by the ex-service community - and the retention of a Veterans' Review Board which includes service members.

As to change, we must as a Government recognise that the issues confronting veterans are not static. The needs of veterans now are not those that applied at wars' end. We will therefore continue to look to the Repatriation Commission to provide advice on the most effective means of responding to the changing needs of our veterans as they grow old and to ensure that necessary changes are canvassed with, and clearly explained to, those affected.

We must look ahead, and my Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Ben Humphrays, has been doing just that.

Already in the pipeline for consideration in the Government's next term is a number of reports which Ben has commissioned. These include a major review of the Veterans' Affairs Health Program, an evaluation of the accessibility of services to aged veterans and war widows, an inquiry into merchant mariners and allied veterans and a review of the free limbs scheme administered by the Department.

Each of these reviews covers a vital area of interest to the veterans community.

However, at the top of our agenda for our Fourth term will be a determination to build on the programs my Government has initiated which are designed to ensure that aged veterans and war widows are able to live with dignity in their own homes for as long as possible.

Programs such as "Outreach", the pilot "Veterans' Independence Support Initiative", health promotion activities dealing with safety, nutrition and fitness, and the very popular Joint Ventures scheme are concrete reflections of this philosophy.

In this context there is within the veterans' community one group which carries a burden, uncomplainingly, and with little recognition. I speak of the wives of our veterans who receive the Extreme Disablement Adjustment introduced by my Government last year. In many cases, these women constitute the difference between a veteran living at home or requiring hostel, nursing home or hospital care.

This is a personal sacrifice, willingly made, and it is also a community service. In order to recognise that sacrifice, I wish to announce today that the Government will henceforth automatically provide these wives with the War Widows pension on the death of the veteran. They will not have to prove an entitlement; it will be theirs as a right.

This will bring EDA widows into line with our TPI widows. It will ensure consistency between the two groups.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Obviously there is little point in pursuing the goal of keeping veterans in their own home if that home is unsuitable. I am proud of our innovation as a Government in providing new facilities to veterans through the December 1987 changes to the Defence Service Home Loans Scheme. These reforms introduced a number of flexibilities and benefits not available to veterans who received subsidised loans from the Government prior to December 1987.

We can now carry the innovation further, and I am pleased to inform you that my next Government will move to provide loans portability to the large number of veterans, war widows and serving members who held loans in December 1987. That means that a veteran selling his home and buying another will now not lose the subsidised loan.

In addition we will extend this scheme to enable DSH loans to be used for entry into Retirement Villages. We recognise that, with our veterans increasingly in need of the kind of care and lifestyle that retirement communities can offer, this is an important new area of demand. Veterans considering the Retirement Village option will therefore have a greater range of choice than has previously been available.

I am aware that these initiatives have been matters of high priority within the major ex-service organisations. I wish to give credit to those organisations for the work which they do for veterans, not least of it in co-operatively helping Government identify and target areas of need.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is appropriate at Concord Hospital today that I address some concerns which I know exist about the integration of Repatriation Hospitals into the State Hospital system.

And at this point I pay tribute to Mary Eason, our candidate in Lowe, who has been working hard to present local views on this matter.

My Government is committed to ensuring that the veteran has access to care at the highest level in the local community. We believe, in line with professional medical opinion, that treatment in the local community is what most elderly patients seek, and what offers the best results.

That is the major reason behind our decision to integrate Repatriation Hospitals into the State systems. Integration will ensure that veterans continue to have access to the best medical staff and equipment, at the same time providing them with a greater choice, including placement in hospitals closer to their homes.

We are offering an enhanced scheme which recognises that most veterans do not now, and will not in the near future, want to travel considerable distances, away from their families and friends, to a centralised hospital. To facilitate high quality, responsive local treatment we have therefore proposed for discussion, a system which amounts to a private health care scheme for veterans.

And let me say that I believe that anybody who examines the integration question seriously will acknowledge that integration is inevitable and is crucial for the viability of this and other Repatriation General Hospitals.

For example, Concord now only treats 30 percent of New South Wales veterans and has 35 percent community patients. The hospital is under increasing pressure from many veterans to ease the requirement to be treated here.

But this is not a development which should or need be rushed. Just when integration occurs will depend on the particular local circumstances facing veterans and the hospital, and will be settled by discussion. We are committed to full consultation at every step. I well understand how important this is to the veterans community and to hospital staff.

Both Ben Humphreys and I have guaranteed on a number of occasions that

- . no Repatriation General Hospital will be transferred to a State until a satisfactory agreement has been reached on matters such as priority of access and quality of health care for veterans and war widows, and unless the interests of hospital staff have been adequately safeguarded; and
- . no final decision will be taken if the RSL has reasonable cause for dissatisfaction with the proposed arrangements.

As I said at Heidelberg last April, there is nothing equivocal about these guarantees and no secret agenda underlies the initiatives. I stand firmly behind the guarantees.

And let me add that our commitment to no diminishment in quality of care is important not only to patients and their families but also to those who work within the system and who are naturally interested in job security. The need throughout the health system is for more hospitals and not fewer, and integration is capable of opening doors to better career prospects for staff.

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Ladies and gentlemen

I referred earlier to the Australian War Memorial as a vital means of keeping our young people aware of the sacrifice of veterans and aware too of the horrendous cost of wars and the continuing need for strong defence.

Before closing today I wish to announce that we will, over the next two years in Government, provide the Memorial with funds for the first stage of a new technology pavilion which will enable some of its larger pieces currently in storage to be put on display. We will invest \$5 million to cover the cost of this first stage.

Ben Humphreys has also re-allocated resources to provide a substantial increase to the Memorial staff. Together, these two initiatives will ensure that the War Memorial retains its status as a national symbol of the sacrifices made by veterans for this nation's freedom and for its future.

Ladies and gentlemen

The various proposals which I have announced today are estimated to cost \$18.6 million over the next three years. This is not merely a wishful intention; it is a fully funded commitment. And of course it is additional to the ongoing programs and projects which we are undertaking.

The \$31 million project which I have the honour of opening today is but the latest project in an Australia-wide program which has, since 1983, seen more than \$100 million spent on new or refurbished buildings and new medical equipment at Repatriation Hospitals.

It stands as tangible proof of the way in which the Government, with community support, continues to honour the debt owed to those who fought for this great country. It is the rebuttal in bricks and mortar of any suggestion that we would ever run down facilities for veterans. We shall never do so.

Ladies and gentlemen

I have much pleasure in declaring these new facilities open.

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6045