

Veterans & Ex-Service Personnel

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN VETERANS & EX-SERVICE PERSONNEL DEFENCE AND VETERANS

The Australian Democrats acknowledge the special obligation owed to Veterans and other defence personnel who served the nation in conflict and in peacetime. They are all healthy when they enlist, but all put their lives on the line and many sacrifice their health and well-being as part of their service. Australia must honour this debt.

Our Action Plan

“Whenever troops come home, they deserve more than a welcome home parade and a medal. They deserve to know that any health consequences of their service will be properly dealt with and that they will get recognition of the special debt that we all owe them.”

**Andrew Bartlett,
Queensland Senator**

- The Democrats strongly support retaining the administration of benefits under one piece of legislation and one separate, sufficiently funded, Veterans' Affairs Department with a specialist Veterans' Review Board.
- We recognise the emerging needs of younger Veterans, including those who will return from service in Iraq and Afghanistan with special health and readjustment requirements. The Democrats also support the development of more appropriate assistance for Veterans of the first Gulf War, the East Timor conflict and peace-keeping operations.
- We recognise that military justice processes must be conducted in accordance with the principles of natural justice, open to participation by families and must address health, rehabilitation and repatriation requirements of ADF personnel even after they have left the service. We will continue to support and advocate for legislative changes to Australia's military justice system in line with the full recommendations of the unanimous Senate Committee report of 2005 into the military justice system.
- The Democrats support extending eligibility for the Gold Card to all service persons who served during World War II, including British Commonwealth Occupying Forces (BCOF) members who served in Japan after 1945.
- We support increased funding for community services for Veterans and their families including health care, counselling and home care services, as well as increasing the number of nursing home beds made available for Veterans and their spouses. The Democrats support further funding for the Vietnam Veterans' Counselling Service, including outreach services in regional areas where there are high populations of Vietnam Veterans.
- The Democrats support military superannuation pensions being indexed to Male Total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE) or Consumer Price Index (CPI) (whichever is the greater).

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- We will continue to insist that all recommendations of the Clarke Review into Veterans' entitlements are adopted. The Democrats are opposed to the Government 'cherry-picking' some recommendations and disregarding others.
- We support continuing adjustment of rebates to GPs for Gold Card treatment to ensure they are adequate and reflect the special needs of Veterans.
- We support assistance to the victims (including offspring) of exposure to nuclear, chemical and biological harm. The Democrats continue to support appropriate compensation and medical care for Australians affected by British nuclear tests in the 1950s and 1960s and for those who served in the BCOF in Japan from 1945. We note that legislation passed through Parliament in 2006 gave free cancer health care to Australians exposed to British nuclear tests. We believe that this was too little, too late and was based on a flawed study.
- We support the ongoing service available to Veterans via the Repatriation Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme which makes pharmaceuticals more affordable for Veterans. We do not support government changes that make it harder to reach the safety-net or which would increase co-payments for Veterans' medication.
- We support adequate legal aid funding being provided to Veterans to appeal decisions of the Repatriation Commission, the Veterans' Review Board or the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.
- The Democrats support fixing anomalies within the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Scheme.
- We have long advocated further recognition of service personnel including those who served in the Far East Strategic Reserve (FESR), and recommendations of the Mohr Review in respect of South East Asian service.

The Issues

Military Superannuation

Military superannuation paid from the Defence Force Retirement Benefits Scheme (DFRBS), the Defence Force Retirement and Death Benefits Scheme (DFRDBS) and the Military Superannuation and Benefits Scheme (MSBS) are indexed twice per year to the CPI. For many years veterans and their support groups have been pushing for military superannuation to be indexed to the CPI or MTAWA whichever is the greater to bring military superannuation in line with community standards. Veterans are rightly concerned that their benefits are being eroded due to the use of an inequitable indexation method.

The Democrats will work to have Military superannuation indexation brought into line with civilian benefits, with indexation increases geared to the CPI or MTAWA, whichever is the greater.



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Erosion of health benefits

Medical benefits to Veterans in the form of the Gold Card and the pharmaceutical allowance have also been under pressure. Medical fees are rising and increasingly Veterans are unable to seek medical assistance under Gold Card arrangements and Veterans have to pay more for essential medications for war-caused conditions because of government changes to the pharmaceutical allowance.

The Australian Democrats recognise these growing pressures and will continue to identify and address issues of importance to Veterans in consultation with Veterans' organisations.

Lack of adequate support for wounded and injured service personnel

Despite government rhetoric, there remains a steady stream of examples of defence personnel who receive inadequate treatment and support when they are wounded or injured, whether on active service or as part of their regular service.

The Democrats have persistently raised the issue in the Senate and other forums of the essential need to provide support for defence personnel in times of need. There are too many examples of service men and women feeling they have been discarded and treated as expendable as soon as they are seen as no longer being of use. Those who have supportive families are often left to pick up the pieces, those without this support are left to fend for themselves.

This is simply not good enough and a failure of the most basic responsibility of duty of care. It is also a major long-term impediment to recruitment and retention levels in the ADF. It is a key part of the Democrats' long standing role as a balanced and independent watchdog and agitator to keep pressuring governments of all persuasions to lift their game in the way they treat current and former service men and women.



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