



## DEFENCE FORCE WELFARE ASSOCIATION

*Patron-in-Chief: His Excellency General The Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)*

# DFWA POLICY OBJECTIVES 2016 - 2017

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## INTRODUCTION

The Turnbull Government brought with it a revamped Defence Ministry Team and, it is timely to draw some lessons from previous experience that bore witness to the multitude of promises from all political parties, many of which still remain unfulfilled.

### **What to do then?**

Certainly perhaps the first order of business should be to hold every promise maker of the past to account. Reminding them that unfulfilled promises are broken promises and that electoral redress should not be an unexpected outcome at the ballot box.

And reminding them also that, while reasonable voters have an understanding of the budgetary challenges confronting the Government, there is no doubt those same voters believe there are opportunities for the Government to find the funds to fix the critical issues that are easy enough to fix if the resolve is there to do it.

Proof that anything was possible came early in 2015 when the Government was forced firstly, to considerably improve upon an initial morale-sapping pay offer of 1.5% and secondly, to retract the notion that any pay rise had to somehow come by way of losing some previously hard-won conditions of service. It came again mid-year when DFWA and other community groups lobbying efforts caused the Government not to proceed with the unfair pension indexation changes contained in the 2014-15 Budget. And yet again when DFWA played such a critical and key role in negotiating with the Government to ensure the unique nature of military service was firmly recognised in the legislation that introduced a new ADF Super Scheme on the 1st July 2016.

Critically, that service in the ADF is indeed unique and places special demands on members and their families has been accepted by the Parliament and the Australian people. That is not to say that there is yet a wider public understanding, nor a universal full understanding that that uniqueness is an enshrined given. There is no public record of the Nation's enduring obligations to its service personnel and in turn the latter's obligations to the Nation.

No one should lose sight of the fact that ADF members only have the Parliament and the Government of the day to protect their interests and to give them the 'fair go' all Australians expect as part of their citizenship. It is important to reflect that as servants of the Crown, members of the ADF are disqualified from industrial representation and the protections afforded to all Australians under the Fair Work Act (2009). It is one of DFWA's roles to provide an independent voice representing ADF members to protect and improve their conditions of service.

Put simply, the DFWA expects that the conditions under which ADF members enlist and serve will be honoured. However the DFWA believes that over time, successive Governments have fallen well short of meeting their obligations in this regard. Subtle negative changes to ADF personnel and veterans' entitlements; moves to benchmark ADF members' service conditions against civilian community standards; and moves to treat veterans' support and benefits as 'welfare', are cases in point.

But what of the coming year and the objectives that DFWA should work towards?

## DFWA PURPOSE

Before progressing to identify the Association's objectives for 2016-17 a little background and a reminder of its constituted purpose seems appropriate. Briefly, DFWA was formed in 1959 as the *Regular Defence Force Welfare Association* because: no one body was protecting the welfare needs of those leaving the ADF; no one was protecting the 'Conditions of Service' of those in the ADF; and no one was lobbying to improve military superannuation provisions.

DFWA's purpose thus became a self evident outcome for its being. Its purpose is to promote and protect the interests of serving and former members of the ADF and their families. To deliver on that purpose it:

- Advocates for appropriate and equitable conditions of service for ADF members and their families, including partners and widows/ers and protection of their entitlements and service conditions ;
- Campaigns for adequate retirement benefits for ADF veterans and their equitable treatment;
- Provides advocacy services on behalf of serving and retired personnel who may have a claim on Government under various Commonwealth legislation covering compensation, superannuation, and veterans' entitlements; and
- Provides financial support where practicable, by way of grants or loans, to members in necessitous circumstances.

## KEY POLICY OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES 2016-17

**DFWA's targeted lobbying objectives in 2016-17 are outlined below. A detailed brief on these may be obtained separately from its National Office.**

### 1. **Military Superannuation**

#### a. **Fair Indexation for all DFRDB recipients**

The provisions of the *Defence Force Retirements Benefits Fair Indexation Act* should be extended to include all DFRDB superannuants under 55, especially to those in receipt of DFRDB invalidity superannuation pensions. This is only fair to also ensure the purchasing power of their superannuation is maintained, the intent of the original enabling legislation.

#### b. **Fair Indexation for all other Military Superannuation payments**

All components of military superannuation payments under DFRDB, DFRB and MSBS, including preserved funds and the total reversionary pension for partners of deceased military superannuation pensioners, should also be indexed as provided for under the *Defence Force Retirements Benefits Fair Indexation Act*.

#### c. **MSBS Access to Employer Benefits**

MSBS members under preservation age and no longer serving but with "preserved employer" funds should be given the same opportunity provided to all Australians – ie, the ability to access employer superannuation payments and to be able to roll over their full benefit into a superannuation fund of their choice.

#### d. **DFRDB Commutation**

The immediate adoption and application to current DFRDB recipients of up-to-date life tables in calculating commutation and fortnightly payments for all new DFRDB superannuants; and rectification of the financial injustices caused by the application of out-dated life tables over the life of these schemes.

## 2. **Veterans Disability Payments**

The Veterans' Disability compensation payment for TPI/SR has declined in real terms when the Above General Rate is measured against the tax adjusted minimum wage. The Above General Rate is currently 65% of the tax adjusted minimum wage. This is unconscionable and a sad reflection on the Nation's obligation to care for its Veterans. DFWA believes that the Above General Rate component should be commensurate against the tax adjusted minimum wage as a community standard. For the Government to deny this is contrary to their responsibility to provide an adequate standard of living for the disabled veteran and his/her family

## 3. **ADF Pay**

Aggressively pursue a means of ensuring that members of the ADF are adequately consulted and independently represented in matters referred to the Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal. In particular use of Section 58KD of the Act (agreed case provisions) should not be used without consultation with DFWA in its role as a professional association representing the interests of serving ADF members

## 4. **Single ADF Compensation Arrangements**

There should be a single streamlined compensation regime for all serving and former members of the ADF that;

- recognizes the unique nature of military service,
- is beneficial in its application; and
- with streamlined and simplified claims and appeal processes.

## 5. **DVA Culture and Processes**

Legislation providing for support to veterans and ex-service personnel should be applied in a 'beneficial' way. DFWA believes the DVA has become more 'process' rather than 'client' focused. This has led to the use of its considerable legal resources, not available to veterans when contesting claims for assistance. DVA should introduce an ongoing information program to educate staff about the nature of military service and its consequences on ADF members and their families. Departmental processes badly need streamlining to reduce the time taken to assess claims and this should be a priority. DFWA believes that support available under the various Acts should be provided with more empathy and understanding and with the beneficial intent with which the governments of the day enacted the legislation.

## 6. **Proposed Australian Military Accord**

Adoption of an Australian Military Accord to place on public record the Nation's enduring obligations to its service personnel and, in turn, the latter's obligations to the Nation.

# **OTHER ONGOING POLICIES AND OBJECTIVES**

## 7. **Defence Housing**

Protect continued Government ownership of the Defence Housing Authority for the protection of a critically important condition of service that provides quality housing to Defence families and supports ADF capability.

## 8. Care and Accommodation Needs of Homeless Veterans

The Government needs to provide support as identified by the combined ESOs Homeless Program

## 9. ADF Member Representation in Curricula Design and Application of Vocational Training

The Government is revamping the national vocational training structure. This has resulted in the Government Skills Australia and its industry advisory committees being disbanded. DFWA believes a separate grouping of like an industry such as policing, first responders and emergency management organisations with similar regulatory imperatives is both possible and necessary.

We believe that there is a need to:

- a. Adjust the Public Safety Industry Advisory Committee (PSIRC) grouping to a more homogenous mix; and
- b. Require Defence to ensure training courses and qualifications are compatible with the Australian Vocation Education and Training (VET) system.

## 10. Appropriate Community Accommodation

Community accommodation is required to meet the needs of veterans with mental health issues as well as younger veterans in need of care. Additional Government funding and DVA support is therefore required.

## 11. Mental Health Support Programs

The Government should accredit, and where appropriate fund, ESO's active mental health support programs that are evidenced based or at least evidence aware.

## 12. National Consistency of Education Curricula

ADF families regularly report that not having a uniform school starting age has affected their child's education both academically and socially. Whilst the aim of the national curriculum is to align the school years to teach the same levels, this will have no effect on children moving interstate and being required to enter a different school year (repeat or skip), due to the different starting ages of the States.