

# Labor's Plan for Veterans' Affairs



New Leadership.

# Labor's Plan for Veterans' Affairs

**Election 2007**

Policy Document

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# Labor's Plan for Veterans' Affairs

## Overview

*"There is perhaps no greater duty that we as a nation and as a parliament have than to honour, remember and express our gratitude to those Australians who have served in the defence of our nation in times of war, because our security and liberty have not come without a price."*

Federal Labor Leader Kevin Rudd, 13 August 2007

The Australian community is justly proud of its veterans and ex-service men and women.

They have served proudly in the finest tradition of the Australian Defence Force, and have courageously protected our country and its interests during times of war and conflict – often at immense personal cost to themselves and their families.

Labor considers that the provision of robust services and support for the ex-service community is a sincere way to demonstrate gratitude and recognition of the bravery and sacrifice of these Australian men and women.

Veterans' Affairs will be a Rudd Labor Government priority.

After 11 long years of the Howard Government and a succession of ministers, the ex-service community has come to regard promises with some cynicism. Veterans are concerned that the Government takes them for granted and then plays catch-up each election year.

The Howard Government has been forced to provide pre-election catch-up funding to restore the eroded value of veterans' benefits under its watch, and to rescue the under-funded Gold Card.

Many veterans rightfully ask whether the Government's actions match its rhetoric of a grateful nation.

A Rudd Labor Government will provide a fresh approach to veterans' affairs, and a fresh leadership team, which is dedicated to working in partnership with the ex-service community on the issues that concern them.

Labor will work hard to achieve six goals for veterans:

- To restore the value of compensation and prevent further erosion due to unfair indexation.
- To heal our veterans both mentally and physically, providing the very best support.
- To care for the families of veterans, in recognition that it is not just veterans themselves who make personal sacrifices to defend our country.
- To empower veterans, giving them a strong leadership voice and due recognition.
- To improve the operation of the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA).
- To recognise courage and sacrifice, through support for appropriate commemorative activity.

The measures in this document have been developed through listening and consulting with veterans and ex-service organisations on their needs for now and for the years ahead. In total the commitments in this document are worth more than \$900 million of funding over the next four years.

Labor's Plan for Veterans' Affairs will be the starting point for a Rudd Labor Government in improving the wellbeing of Australia's veterans and the wider ex-service community.

## Veterans' Affairs in Australia

*"The obligation which comes first to all governments is that of satisfying and maintaining the strength requisite to keep the fighting men fit wherever they may be fighting, and the civil populations must provide that substance because there is no other physical way in which it can be done.*

*When the war is over, the obligations to the fighting men will not have ceased.*

*The burdens which governments will carry will be dual burdens – to rebuild the resources of the country so that the arts of peace may flourish, but at the same time to satisfy that solemn debt of honour which all governments owe to the fighting men, and to their dependants, for having stood between the enemy and those at home and enabled those at home to sleep comfortably at nights and to be assured that their institutions and their way of life would not be molested by an invader."*

Labor Prime Minister John Curtin 1 June 1944

Australia has a proud military heritage and owes a debt of gratitude to our service men and women, past and present.

They have served with distinction on the shores of Gallipoli, the battlefields of Western Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East.

They have fought bravely in Vietnam, the jungles of South East Asia and New Guinea.

They have shown great courage in the Pacific, Korea and Japan and helped keep peace in Africa.

More recently they have served with professionalism in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Iraq and Afghanistan.

When Labor Prime Minister John Curtin spoke to the Canadian Parliament in 1944 he spoke of the solemn debt that all governments owe to our veterans and their dependents.

This is a solemn debt that Labor takes very seriously.

However, Labor also recognises that neither side of politics has delivered fully on this debt.

There is no doubt that Australia has a world class repatriation system, but it is also clear that much more remains to be done.

A Rudd Labor Government will deliver better services for the ex-service community.

Under the Howard Government, veterans and ex-service personnel are sick of being told that they have never been better off.

A Rudd Labor Government will ensure that veterans and the ex-service community get a fair go.

*"There is perhaps no greater duty that we as a nation and as a parliament have than to honour, remember and express our gratitude to those Australians who have served in the defence of our nation in times of war, because our security and liberty have not come without a price"*

Federal Labor Leader  
Kevin Rudd,  
13 August 2007

## Challenges for Veterans' Affairs

A Rudd Labor Government will face a number of significant challenges in Veterans' Affairs, including:

- Protecting veterans from rising costs of living and the erosion of their entitlements.
- Protecting the health and wellbeing of veterans, ex-service personnel, and their families.
- Ensuring the DVA is efficient and responsive to the needs of a changing ex-service community.

### Protecting veterans from rising costs of living and the erosion of their entitlements

A key concern within the veteran community is the impact of rising costs of living, and the erosion of their entitlements over time due to unfair indexation arrangements under the Howard Government.

#### Rising costs of living

In the past five years, health care costs have risen 31 per cent; fruit and vegetable prices have increased 42 per cent; and fuel has increased 46 per cent.

Labor understands the impact of rising costs of living and the importance of ensuring that entitlements do not erode in value.

To help combat this, Labor committed to index all disability pensions and the domestic component of the War Widow's Pension to movements in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or Male Total Average Weekly Earnings (MTAWE), whichever is greater.

Labor made these promises to ensure that the real value of veterans' pensions was maintained.

Belatedly, the Howard Government has now adopted Labor's policy.

### Protecting the health and wellbeing of veterans, ex-service personnel and their families

Protecting the health and wellbeing of veterans, ex-service personnel and their families is a key challenge.

Time and again, we see people who struggle to receive the right levels of support and who fall through the cracks between existing services, or those who simply find that the services are poorly coordinated and difficult to access.

#### Key findings of the third Australian Vietnam Veterans Mortality and Cancer Incidence Study 2005

This study found that Australian Vietnam Veterans have a 15 per cent higher incidence of cancer than the Australian male population average.

Veterans and ex-service personnel are sick of being told by the Howard Government that they have never been better off

Labor will work constantly to deliver better services for the ex-service community

Vietnam Veterans experience a higher than expected incidence for Hodgkin's disease, chronic lymphoid leukaemia, melanoma and cancers of the prostate, eye, lung, head and neck.

Specific causes of death that are significantly higher amongst veterans include mortality from digestive system diseases (primarily alcoholic liver disease), lung and pancreatic cancer, motor vehicle accidents and suicide.

As more Defence personnel return from current theatres of conflict with physical and mental afflictions, the Australian Government cannot afford to be complacent about the services and support that it provides to veterans.

A Rudd Labor Government will seek better outcomes for veterans in the areas of mental health, health care, aged care, and family support.

### **Ensuring the Department of Veterans' Affairs is efficient and responsive to the needs of the ex-service community**

The veterans community is changing.

With most World War Two veterans now well into their eighties and Vietnam Veterans at or approaching retirement age, the needs of younger veterans from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan may be quite different.

A Rudd Labor Government will:

- Ensure that the quality of veterans' services is maintained and improved.
- Ensure that the changing needs of veterans are catered for.

### **Australia's new veterans**

One stark implication of increased and varied overseas Australian Defence Force (ADF) deployments is an increase in the number of servicemen and women returning home with problems that will need to be catered for.

We already know that the DVA has received 2,345 claims from troops who have served in Afghanistan, and a further 1,500 claims relating to Iraq.

These conflicts are having a serious impact on the lives of younger veterans and their families.

The special standing that veterans have in our community entitles them to a stand alone Department that is properly funded to provide for their needs.

A Rudd Labor Government is committed to the continued operation of a properly funded and stand alone Department of Veterans' Affairs.

Labor will ensure that the Department is efficient and compassionate, and that veterans and their families do not have to battle a bureaucratic jungle to receive their entitlements and benefits.

The blow-outs in claims processing times under the Howard Government's watch are unacceptable.

Above all, a Rudd Labor Government will listen to the veterans' community and will be vigorously engaged on issues that affect their wellbeing.

Labor will ensure that the Department of Veterans' Affairs is efficient and compassionate, and that veterans and their families do not have to battle a bureaucratic jungle to receive their due entitlements and benefits

## Labor's Plan for Veterans' Affairs

### Summary

A Rudd Labor Government will work hard to achieve six goals for veterans:

- To restore the value of compensation and prevent further erosion due to unfair indexation.
- To heal our veterans both mentally and physically, providing the very best support.
- To care for the families of veterans, in recognition that it is not just veterans themselves who make personal sacrifices to defend our country.
- To empower veterans, giving them a strong leadership voice in the community and due recognition.
- To improve the operation of the Department of Veterans' Affairs.
- To recognise courage and sacrifice through support for appropriate commemorative activity.

### Restoring the value of compensation and entitlements

Labor acknowledges the widespread concern in the veteran community about the erosion in value of compensation payments, especially those affecting our most severely disabled war veterans.

Compensation payments and other entitlements are provided in recognition of our veterans who, as a result of their service, are now left with severe physical or mental afflictions.

This is one way which our society can try to repay them for their sacrifice.

Labor believes it is imperative that these payments are not allowed to further erode in value.

Labor has made a number of commitments that have led the way to help restore the value of compensation and entitlements.

This has led to recent changes, including:

- A fair indexation method for all veterans' pensions.
- An increase in the Extreme Disablement Adjustment pension.
- Increased non-economic loss compensation payments.
- A fair indexation method for the War Widow's Pension.
- An increase in the domestic component of the War Widow's Pension.

Legislation implementing all of these initiatives passed through Parliament with bipartisan support in September 2007, effective from March 2008.

In addition to these changes, a Rudd Labor Government will also:

- Remove the Simpler Super tax hike.
- Increase access to Widow's Benefit for post-retirement marriages.
- Release and consult on the Military Superannuation Review report.
- Introduce a new National Transport Concessions Scheme.

- Implement a new *Making Ends Meet* plan to assist veterans with spiralling costs of living.

### ***Provide fair indexation for all veterans' compensation pensions***

To help veterans with increases in their costs of living, Labor committed to increasing the benefits paid to our nation's disabled war veterans by providing a fairer system of indexation for all disability compensation payments administered by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA).

Labor committed to indexing these payments to movements in the CPI or MTAWE, whichever is greater.

It is estimated that this change will benefit almost 140,000 disabled war veterans, including those who fought and served in conflicts that include World War Two, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, the Gulf War, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan.

A Rudd Labor Government will ensure that compensation payments to our veterans retain their value over time.

Following Labor's lead in this area, the Howard Government announced it would adopt Labor's policy in September 2007.

### ***An increase in the Extreme Disablement Adjustment pension***

Labor supported the recently announced \$15 fortnightly increase in the Extreme Disablement Adjustment (EDA) pension.

This increase will benefit 13,500 of our most severely disabled war veterans.

The Howard Government ignored EDA pensioners in the 2007 budget.

Following pressure from the ex-service community and from Labor, however, the Government grudgingly accepted the need to increase these pensions.

### ***Increased non-economic loss compensation payments***

While our veterans have been faced with rising costs of living, the Howard Government has allowed the real value of their pensions to erode.

Labor supports the recently announced five per cent increase to the whole General Rate table. This increase will affect both Above-General Rate and General Rate recipients. The increases will take place in March 2008.

### ***Fair indexation for War Widow's Domestic Allowance***

Labor understands that war widows, like veterans, are suffering with increased costs of living.

That is why Labor announced that we would apply the same indexation arrangements to the Domestic Allowance component of War Widow's Pension as currently exist for the rest of that pension.

The Howard Government had refused to index the Domestic Allowance component of the War Widow's Pension over a long period of time, despite the Clarke Report in 2004 recommending that it do so.

Fair indexation of veterans' compensation pensions will affect almost 140,000 disabled war veterans including those who fought and served in conflicts including World War II, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, the Gulf War, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan

Labor's plan to implement fairer indexation arrangements for this payment will benefit more than 110,000 war widows.

Once again, the Howard Government belatedly endorsed Labor's policy.

### ***An increase in the Domestic Allowance component of the War Widow's Pension***

A Rudd Labor Government will implement the recently announced \$10 a fortnight increase in the Domestic Allowance component of the War Widow's Pension.

This component of the War Widow's Pension has remained largely unchanged since 1946.

As this increase largely addresses the erosion in value of this payment under the Howard Government, Labor was happy to endorse it.

### ***Remove the Simpler Super tax hike***

The Howard Government's July 2007 changes to superannuation laws imposed a new tax on some MSBS members who retire earlier, in some cases increasing the tax payable on partial commutation lump sums by up to 413 per cent.

This tax increase was unnecessary and unfair, and would disadvantage retiring Defence personnel.

Labor called on the Howard Government to protect both DFRDB members and MSBS members from the new tax, but the Government initially only protected DFRDB members.

Labor committed to removing the new tax for MSBS members, extending to them same protection as DFRDB members, and welcomed the Howard Government's belated decision to follow.

This change, driven by Labor, will benefit up to 46,400 contributing MSBS members.

### ***Increase access to Widow's Benefit for post-retirement marriages***

In September 2007, the Government introduced the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Bill 2007 which provides for the payment of Widow's Benefit where a DFRDB pensioner commenced a marital relationship after 60, but died within five years of the relationship commencing. The same entitlement has been available to civilian widows since 2003.

Under pressure from Labor to provide equity between civilian and defence widows, the Howard Government indicated that it might consider introducing a complex process of Act of Grace payments, but only for cases arising after the 2006 budget and before the passage of legislation. This approach will not provide certainty nor fair treatment for defence widows.

A Rudd Labor Government will amend the Superannuation Legislation Amendment Act 2007 to backdate the new post-retirement marriage arrangements to 1 July 2003, to ensure equity between the Commonwealth and the Defence superannuation schemes.

Labor understands that, like veterans, war widows are struggling with increased costs of living

That's why Labor will apply the same indexation arrangements to the domestic allowance component of the war widows' pension as currently exists for the rest of that pension

***Release and consult on the Military Superannuation Review report***

There have been a number of outstanding issues regarding military superannuation that have been raised by individuals and organisations with an interest in this area. That's why the Howard Government had to establish an independent Military Superannuation Review earlier this year.

After taking submissions, holding hearings and gathering evidence and information about these matters, the report was finalised and presented to the Government in July. Since that time, over three months ago, the Government has refused to release the report or to comment publicly about its contents and conclusions.

The Military Superannuation Review is the latest example of the Howard Government refusing to release vital information about the operation, costs and alternative policy approaches that should be considered in this area. It follows on from a refusal to release economic modelling data that has been used as a basis for Government estimates about the long term costs of alternative indexation systems.

The inability to access this report and the other data held by Government has meant the important public debate about what should be the long term approach to military superannuation has been hamstrung. This has also severely constrained Labor's capacity to evaluate a range of policy options accurately and effectively.

Labor is committed to making sure that any changes to military superannuation are understood and properly considered by the wider defence and ex-service community and are in their long-term interest. It will not be possible to do this without a proper discussion and evaluation of the Military Superannuation Review.

Therefore, Labor commits to public release the review report, and to conducting extensive public consultations about its contents and recommendations.

This will provide for a fair and reasonable approach to be developed, with input from the defence and ex-service community.

***Introduce a National Transport Concessions Scheme***

A Rudd Labor Government will invest \$50 million to establish a National Transport Concessions Scheme, to ensure that all ex-service men and women with State and Territory Government Seniors Cards can access public transport concessions right across Australia.

The veteran community rightly believe that on this issue, the Howard Government has taken their support for granted.

The Howard Government never delivered its 2001 election promise to implement a National Transport Concession Scheme. Efforts by State Governments to enable national recognition failed because the Howard Government refused to provide sufficient funding to achieve this.

Interstate recognition of transport concessions is important for veterans.

Labor will deliver this scheme in cooperation with State and Territory Governments by no later than 1 January 2009.

Reciprocal transport concessions will help veterans to travel, visit grandchildren, and attend important occasions on the ex-service calendar.

### ***Provide extra financial support through 'Making Ends Meet'***

Under its *Making Ends Meet* plan, a Rudd Labor Government will provide increased and more regular financial support for older Australians, people with disabilities and carers to help with spiralling petrol, food and grocery prices and housing costs.

While the Howard Government has been telling the ex-service community that they have never been off, Labor knows that many in the ex-service community live on fixed incomes and struggle with the rising costs of living.

*Making Ends Meet* will help by providing:

- An increase in Utilities Allowance to \$500 per annum, which will be paid in quarterly instalments of \$125 to meet quarterly utility bills. Utilities Allowance will also extend to recipients of Carer Payments and the Disability Support Pension.
- A 50 per cent increase in Telephone Allowance from \$88 to \$132, to help those with a home internet connection meet their internet costs.
- A Seniors' Internet Fund to provide eligible community and ex-service organisations with grants of up to \$10,000 each to set up free internet connection for their members.
- The Seniors Concession Allowance will also be increased to \$500 per annum to help eligible self-funded retirees.

### **Healing our veterans both physically and mentally**

Many veterans suffer from a range of physical and mental afflictions as a result of their service.

Our focus should not just be on effective treatment but also on prevention, early intervention, and proactive outreach programs.

The measures in this section are health and ageing initiatives for ex-service people and their families.

In this context, a Rudd Labor Government will:

- Help address the cost of pharmaceuticals for war caused disabilities.
- Increase funding for the Applied Suicide and Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) program.
- Implement a comprehensive ADF mental health 'lifecycle' package.
- Make community mental health care 'ex-service friendly'.
- Conduct an independent study into suicide in the ex-service community.
- Hold an annual Veterans' Health Week.
- Provide for young veterans with complex care needs in the Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement.

There is an obligation on government to ensure that it provides the very best health and rehabilitation services for our veterans. Our focus should not just be on reactive treatments but also on preventative actions and proactive outreach programs

- Review the aged care needs and 'special needs' status of veterans.
- Provide zero real interest loans to build or extend aged care facilities.
- Introduce the Commonwealth Dental Program.

### ***Help address the cost of pharmaceuticals for war caused disabilities***

Labor understands that the ex-service community is concerned about the unfairness of the Howard Government's changes to the pharmaceutical co-payment, which requires them to purchase pharmaceuticals for war caused disabilities.

Over the last ten years, veterans have spent more than \$110 million on their own pharmaceuticals.

This is a complex issue. Labor does not regard it as fair that veterans should have to carry a major financial burden in order to obtain pharmaceuticals to treat war-caused disabilities. However, there are a number of ways in which the cost of pharmaceuticals for war caused disabilities can be reimbursed and calculated. In order to ensure that any changes to the system provide a legitimate benefit to those who are deserving on this basis, there is a need to properly consider the options that are available. This is difficult to do without access to government information regarding the implications of the various options.

Labor commits to reviewing this matter in the first term of Government and to establishing, in consultation with the ex-service community, a fair solution that relieves the burden on veterans of the cost of medications to treat their war caused disabilities.

This will be a key objective to be addressed in our first term of Government.

### ***Increase funding for the Applied Suicide and Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) program***

A Rudd Labor Government will provide an additional \$1 million in funding for the ASIST program aimed at preventing suicide by veterans by training volunteers to recognise at risk veterans and ensure they get help.

The new funding will support a range of reforms including a greater promotion of ASIST through an increase in its advertising budget, providing more information and training sessions to be held in rural and remote areas, and an expansion of the range of programs offered by ASIST trainers.

A Rudd Labor Government will bring the ASIST program formally under the control of the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) to facilitate these reforms and to ensure the long term viability and independence of the ASIST program.

Labor will also honour the Government's recent announcement on Operation Life.

### ***Implement a comprehensive ADF mental health 'lifecycle' package***

Mental health is a significant issue for both current ADF personnel and the ex-service community.

In 2006, there were 52,473 veterans with an accepted mental health disability. However, access to mental health services by members of the ex-service community needs to be improved. Only about half of those with an accepted disability of post-traumatic stress disorder seek treatment for it.

This is why a Rudd Labor Government will introduce a package of nine strategic mental health initiatives targeted across the four stages of an ADF member's lifecycle.

Labor will integrate mental health care across the four stages of ADF employment; recruitment, service, transition or discharge, and rehabilitation and resettlement into civilian life.

The package aims to achieve four outcomes across the ADF 'lifecycle':

- Enhanced psychological resilience among serving personnel.
- Better early intervention and mental health surveillance.
- Successful transition from defence to civilian life for the member and their family.
- Effective rehabilitation and support, and timely mental health treatment.

The package will be implemented as a partnership between the Department of Defence, DVA and the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH).

### ***Make community mental health care 'ex-service friendly'***

DVA has commenced some initial mental health reforms to shift the focus of care from tertiary mental health care to community based mental health care. However, much of this work is narrowly focused on care provided by General Practitioners.

A Rudd Labor Government will provide better support for the full range of community mental health care for veterans by investing in competency development for a range of other community mental health practitioners. This means that secondary mental health care providers, such as psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers, will be more 'ex-service friendly', with better skills for identifying and treating service-related mental health problems.

The ACPMH will develop and implement a package of measures in partnership with the Department of Defence and DVA that will:

- Provide additional training to mental health workers about service-related mental health issues.
- Design and implement a range of high quality training initiatives, along the lines of GP education already undertaken by DVA.
- Target medical and allied health training courses.
- Provide skills training in evidence based interventions through workshops, internet based training, and mixed media packages.

### ***Conduct an independent study into suicide in the ex-service community***

Labor will tackle mental health issues in the ex-service community by conducting a study that examines the broad issue of suicide in the ex-service

Labor will integrate mental health care across the four stages of the ADF career lifecycle: recruitment, service, transition or discharge, and rehabilitation and resettlement

community, and a number of specific cases of suicide over the last three years, to help identify:

- Ex-service members that are at an increased risk of self harm.
- Common contributing factors among ex-service members who have committed or attempted suicide.
- The extent of suicide within the ex-service community.
- Lifestyle or other factors that may be contributing to suicide in the ex-service community.
- Recommended administrative reforms or initiatives to help combat suicide in the ex-service community.

Detailed terms of reference for the study will be developed in consultation with major ex-service organisations and will be conducted independently of DVA, but with its full support.

### ***Hold an annual Veterans' Health Week***

A Rudd Labor Government will hold an annual Veterans' Health Week, to build strong partnerships between government and ex-service organisations around initiatives that promote and enhance better health and ageing in the ex-service community.

This measure has the support of the Australian General Practice Network.

The week will focus on early intervention and preventative health for veterans and will be organised by DVA state offices in collaboration with local ex-service organisations.

It will focus awareness around ex-service health issues and services, promote mental and physical wellbeing, and provide opportunities to build health-promoting partnerships between the ex-service community, the wider community and government.

### ***Include young ex-service people with disabilities in the Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement***

A Rudd Labor Government will ensure that negotiations to finalise the new Commonwealth State Territory Disability Agreement incorporate the care and support needs of younger ex-service men and women with a disability, including residential and in-home care support, support for families and other assistance, and involve DVA in these negotiations.

### ***Review the aged care needs of veterans and 'special needs'***

A Rudd Labor Government will review the aged care needs of veterans and way to improve the effectiveness and the operability of 'special needs' status, as part of a broader review into aged care planning ratios.

The last review of veterans' aged care needs was in 1999. Since that time the demographics of the ex-service community have changed considerably.

This review will consider how well the mainstream service system is meeting veteran-specific needs, examine the interface between the Department of

Labor will conduct a study into suicide within the ex-service community and a number of specific cases of suicide that have occurred over the past five years.

Health and Ageing and DVA and ways to monitor data on veterans' ageing health, and their access to and use of aged care services.

Under the Howard Government, 'special needs' residential care and community care places were allocated but not monitored. The review will also consider ways to monitor special need allocations to ensure that places are delivered appropriately and to inform future allocation rounds.

### ***Provide zero real interest loans for aged care facilities***

Many in the veterans' community have expressed concern about the availability of aged care.

Labor has sought to ensure that veterans' issues are carefully considered in the formulation of Labor's aged care policies.

Labor will provide \$300 million in zero real interest loans to fast-track the building of residential and respite facilities in areas of greatest need. This will provide up to an additional 2,500 aged care beds.

A Rudd Labor Government will also:

- Provide 2,000 new Commonwealth-funded transition care or 'step down' places to give up to 13,000 patients the best possible chance to return home from hospital.
- Streamline the Aged Care Approval Round process to reduce the waiting time between allocation of aged care beds and these beds becoming operational.

### ***Introduce the Commonwealth Dental Health Program***

Labor will introduce the Commonwealth Dental Health Program, and as the first instalment will fund up to one million dental treatments and consultations to provide relief for 650,000 people on public dental waiting lists.

The Howard Government dismantled the Commonwealth Dental Health Program in 1996, which impacted on many ex-service men and women who are on fixed incomes, leaving them without proper dental care.

Labor's \$2.5 billion National Health and Hospitals Reform Plan aims to stop the blame game and get on with the job of improving health services.

### ***Caring for the families of veterans***

The role a veteran's family has in providing veterans with love, support and care cannot be underestimated.

It should also be acknowledged that a veteran's service impacts on his or her family, including on their health.

We need to investigate the effects of a veteran's service on their families so we can design appropriate responses and programs to assist them.

A Rudd Labor Government is committed to providing care and support to ex-service families following the death of veterans.

Labor will ensure that adequate financial support is provided to Australia's war widows and will index the Domestic component of the War Widow's Pension

Labor will provide \$300 million in interest free loans to fast-track the building of residential and respite facilities in areas of greatest need. This will provide up to an additional 2,500 aged care beds.

The role a veteran's family has in providing veterans with love, support and care, cannot be underestimated.

by the same method as the rest of that pension.

A Rudd Labor Government will also raise that component by \$10 a fortnight.

Labor will also extend access to Widow's Benefit for post-retirement marriages.

In this context, a Rudd Labor Government will:

- Extend the Income Support Supplement to widows under the qualifying age without dependents.
- Conduct the Vietnam Veterans Family Study.
- Extend bereavement payments for single Totally and Permanently Incapacitated (TPI) and Extreme Disablement Adjustment (EDA) veterans who die without sufficient assets to pay for a funeral.
- Automatically grant the War Widow's Pension to widows of Temporary Totally Incapacitated (TTI) and Intermediate Rate pensioners.

### ***Extend the Income Support Supplement to widows without dependents***

Currently a widow who does not have children who live at home at the time the pension is granted is unable to claim an Income Support Supplement if they are under the age of 58.

Labor believes that this is an unfair distinction.

A Rudd Labor Government will extend the payment of Income Support Supplement to widows under the age of 58 without dependents.

### ***Vietnam Veterans Family Study***

For some time Labor has argued for the need for a study into the health of children of Vietnam veterans.

The Howard Government belatedly agreed to such a study in August.

This commitment is a positive step forward and will continue under a Rudd Labor Government.

Labor will ensure that the ex-service community is fairly and appropriately represented and consulted as this study progresses.

### **The health of Vietnam veterans' children**

A 1998 health study of Vietnam Veterans, conducted by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, found that their children have a greater incidence of congenital abnormalities than the general population, including spina bifida, cleft palate, acute myeloid leukaemia and adrenal gland cancer.

This study also found that children of Vietnam Veterans have three times the suicide rate of the general community, and that this rate worsened from the 1980s to the 1990s.

### ***Extend bereavement payments for single TPI and EDA veterans who die without sufficient assets to pay for a funeral***

When an EDA or TPI veteran dies, the partner of the veteran receives six fortnightly payments of their disability compensation pension.

A Rudd Labor Government will extend this payment to also include single TPI and EDA recipients to support the families of those veterans with paying for the costs of a funeral where the deceased veteran dies without sufficient assets to pay for a funeral.

The payments will be paid into the estate of the deceased veteran and will match those currently paid into the estates of partnered veterans.

### ***Automatic granting of War Widow's Pension to widows of TTI and Intermediate Rate pensioners***

Currently if a veteran in receipt of a TPI or EDA pension dies, their partner will receive an automatic grant of the War Widow's Pension.

This is a clear anomaly in the Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986 that treats TTI and Intermediate Rate pensioners less equitably than other similar pension recipients.

A Rudd Labor Government will extend the automatic granting of the pension to include partners of TTI and Intermediate Rate pensioners to provide some peace of mind to these veterans and their families.

Labor will extend the automatic granting of the pension to include partners of TTI and Intermediate Rate pensioners to provide some peace of mind to these veterans and their families

## **Empowering the ex-service community**

Governments can never fully understand the nature of a veteran's sacrifice.

Therefore we must have effective processes in place to allow the veteran community to communicate their needs to government in a representative and independent manner.

The veteran community should be able to communicate through representation on departmental committees and should be broadly consulted on important decisions that impact upon them.

Labor strongly supports the independence of the VVCS and its governing body the National Advisory Committee.

Labor believes that this body must be representative of all sections of the veteran community while also maintaining its independence from DVA.

A Rudd Labor Government will:

- Increase financial assistance for ex-service organisations.
- Establish a Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Ex-Service Matters.
- Establish an Inquiry into former F-111 Deseal/Reseal Workers.

### ***Increase financial assistance for Ex-Service Organisations***

Ex-Service Organisations (ESOs) and their officials deliver an invaluable service to the ex-service community though the assistance and support they provide.

There are currently two Government programs that assist ex-service organisations to provide quality service to their members. They are the Training and Information Program (TIP) and the Building Excellence in Support Training (BEST) program.

### **The BEST and TIP Programs**

The aim of BEST is to provide support and resources to ESO practitioners for pensions and welfare work to assist veterans, past and present members of the Australian Defence Force and their dependants.

A major objective of BEST is to ensure high quality claims and appeals assistance by ESO practitioners, which in turn will assist the department in timely and appropriate processing of claims.

TIP provides training and information for Advocates, Welfare and Pension Officers who are volunteers working within ESOs.

TIP training is delivered to enable ESO officials to provide the best possible advice to veterans and former ADF members seeking their services.

Until recently, the Howard Government would not commit any funding for TIP beyond this year's budget, meaning that the program's future was uncertain. We now know that the Coalition wants to collapse the two programs into one.

Labor believes that these programs are invaluable to the ex-service community.

Well trained and supported ESOs and individuals contribute greatly to improving the operation of DVA – and they also provide a saving to government through their work.

In recognition of this fact, Labor will commit an additional \$8 million to support ex service organisations to provide essential services for their members.

This will be done through a one-off capital equipment program of \$5 million this financial year under the BEST program, designed to equip and upgrade ESO's capacity to effectively support the provision of timely, accurate and effective advice and assistance to their members.

In addition, Labor will commit to funding the TIP program over the next three years, with an increase in current funding levels of over 10 per cent. A total of \$3 million will be committed.

Labor recognises the importance of ex-service organisations in making sure our veterans are able to access their entitlements.

### ***Establish a Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Ex-Service Matters***

A Rudd Labor Government will establish a Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Ex-Service Matters to advise government on issues concerning the ex-service community.

The previous Labor Government ran a Ministerial Advisory Council, which was popular with the ex-service community. It was dismantled when the Howard Government came to office.

Under a Rudd Labor Government, the council will report to the Prime Minister. The Minister for Veterans' Affairs will represent the Prime Minister when required.

### **Ministerial Advisory Council on Veterans' Issues**

In 1993 under the previous Labor Government, the then Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Senator John Faulkner, formed the Ministerial Advisory Council on Veterans' Issues to ensure that the *"ex-service community had a high level, ongoing input into Veterans Affairs"*.

The Council was designed to provide independent advice direct to the Minister.

This ensured that the Minister received advice from outside of the bureaucracy and also allowed for the ex-service community to raise matters directly with the Minister.

The Council was able to discuss many issues of great importance and helped inform the Minister on the perspectives of the ex-service community.

This council was disbanded by the Howard Government in 1996.

Many ESOs have requested the reformation of the Council – requests that have been ignored by the Government.

Labor will establish a Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Ex-Service matters to advise government on issues concerning the ex-service community

The establishment of the Council is not intended to reduce the ability of individual ESOs or members of the ex-service community to raise important issues with government.

Labor remains committed to a high level of consultation with all ESOs and individuals on a one on one basis.

The Council is designed to offer an alternative forum for the ex-service community to speak directly to the highest levels of government with a unified voice, and a forum where issues of importance to the ex-service community may be discussed.

The Prime Minister will appoint members to the Council following consultation with the Minister for Veterans' Affairs and the broader ex-service community.

An independent chair will be appointed to the Council following its formation.

The members will be required to possess an appropriate background, experience and understanding of the issues affecting ex-service personnel and their families and a demonstrated ability to make a positive contribution within the ex-service community.

The terms of reference for the Council will be developed in conjunction with the ex-service community but its principal function will be to advise government on issues affecting the ex-service community.

### ***Inquiry into former F-111 Deseal/Reseal workers***

Between 1977 and 2000, hundreds of RAAF workers worked on Deseal/Reseal programs which required them to replace sealant and to scrub the fuel tanks of F-111 aircraft.

Most of this work was carried out at RAAF Base Amberley.

This work exposed them to up to 200 toxic chemicals and has left many with serious health effects, including a higher risk of cancer, memory loss, respiratory problems, skin conditions and a loss of cognitive skills.

The group representing the workers and their families, the F-111 Deseal Reseal Support Group, has been calling for a public inquiry into this matter.

Labor has listened to the concerns of this group and believes that the workers and their families deserve the opportunity to be heard through a full investigation into the Howard Government's handling of this matter.

A Rudd Labor Government will conduct a Parliamentary Inquiry into the adequacy of the Howard Government's response to the health and support needs of RAAF Deseal/Reseal workers and their families.

The Inquiry will have the power to examine all aspects of the Government's response, including the ex-gratia scheme, the Study of Health outcomes in Aircraft Maintenance Personnel (SHOAMP) Health Care Scheme, and overall handling and administration.

### **Improve the operation of the Department of Veterans' Affairs**

A Rudd Labor Government will maintain a separate and properly funded Department of Veterans' Affairs.

While DVA in most cases does its job well, there is always room for improvement.

DVA must urgently address expanding claims processing times and backlogs and must deal with claims in a timely and efficient way.

Claims processing should pay due regard to the unique circumstances and challenges that many veterans and their families face.

In this context, a Rudd Labor Government will:

- Establish an inter-departmental working group to help deal with multiple agencies.
- Establish a public register of ex-service officials and will conduct regular surveys of them.
- Establish a DVA hotline to assist ex-service officials.
- Form a special claims unit.
- Examine Military Compensation arrangements.
- Revisit the unimplemented recommendations of the Clarke Review.
- Improve the transition management process.
- Maintain a separate and properly funded Department of Veterans' Affairs.

***Establish an inter-departmental working group to help deal with multiple agencies***

Currently veterans, ex-service personnel and their families have to deal with DVA, Centrelink, the DFRDB Authority, ComSuper and the Department of Defence to obtain their entitlements, compensation or income.

Labor understands that this can cause confusion and anxiety for the ex-service community and their families.

A Rudd Labor Government will establish an inter-departmental working group to examine ways of rationalising the administrative burden on veterans and ex-service personnel who have to deal with multiple agencies.

The working group would be chaired by the Secretary of DVA and will comprise representatives from all other agencies and have formal representation from the ex-service community.

The working group will report to the Minister within eighteen months of its formation.

***Establish a public register of ex-service officials and will conduct regular surveys of them***

A Rudd Labor Government will prepare a public register of ex-service advocates, and pension and welfare officers.

DVA will then publish this list online to make it accessible for individuals seeking information about local ex-service officials that are available and suitable for assisting with their claims.

Labor will also open communication with ex-service officials by conducting an annual survey of these officials.

The surveys will be administered by DVA and the results will be presented to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs.

The content of the surveys will be developed in conjunction with the Prime Ministerial Advisory Council on Ex-Service Matters.

This commitment is designed to ensure that the Minister receives information about the ex-service community from outside of the bureaucracy.

***Establish a DVA hotline to assist ex-service officials***

DVA will also establish a special hotline and an online facility for selected ex-service officials with a specified level of training and client load to ask questions about current claims they are helping to process.

This will help to reduce errors in claims applications and improve the timeliness of processing them.

***Form a special claims unit***

Under the Howard Government, statistics prepared by DVA show that claims processing times have blown out and there is now a large backlog of longstanding claims.

Labor will establish an inter-departmental working group to examine ways of rationalising the administrative burden on veterans and ex-service personnel

Labor will establish a public register of ex-service advocates, and pension and welfare officers and publish it online to assist individuals who need help in handling their claims

In spite of its establishing a Taskforce, the 2006-07 Annual Report revealed whilst there have been some improvements, overall performance on claims processing times remains very poor. For example, average processing of primary injury claims under the Military Rehabilitation and Compensation Act has more than doubled in two years, from 90 days in 2004-05 to 188 days in 2006-07.

To reduce the backlog, a Rudd Labor Government will form a special claims unit in DVA to monitor the unacceptably high number of claims that are taking longer than the Department's target time to resolve.

The unit will report on the state of these claims and will determine practical means of progressing and resolving outstanding claims.

### ***Examine Military Compensation arrangements***

Labor has received a number of complaints regarding the operation of the current military compensation schemes.

In response to these complaints and requests from the ex-service community, a Rudd Labor Government will examine the Military Compensation system, covering:

- The operation to date of the Military and Rehabilitation Compensation Act 2004.
- The legislative schemes that govern military compensation prior to the 2004 Act and any anomalies that exist within these schemes.
- The level of medical and financial care provided to Defence personnel injured during peacetime service.

This work will be done in conjunction with the inter-departmental working group to streamline and rationalise the administration of the compensation systems administered by DVA.

The review will also be tasked with considering the suitability of access to military compensation schemes for members of the Australian Federal Police who have been deployed overseas.

The full terms of reference and structure of the review will be concluded following consultation with relevant stakeholders and ESOs.

### ***Revisit the recommendations of the Clarke Review***

A Rudd Labor Government will give further consideration to recommendations of the Clarke Review of Veterans' Entitlements that were not acted upon by the Howard Government.

This process will also give early priority to recommendations relating to those Australian participants in the British Commonwealth Occupational Force in Japan and Defence participants in the atomic tests in Australia.

### ***Improve the transition management process***

Improving the transition process for service men and women leaving the ADF will be a key priority of a Rudd Labor Government.

The transition process must focus on delivering the best support and care to our veterans and their families.

Labor recognises that there needs to be a greater understanding of the pressures on young veterans transitioning out of the service and become more proactive in providing the support and care they, and their families, need during this process.

As part of the Mental Health Lifecycle Package for ADF personnel, a Rudd Labor Government will conduct a transition case management pilot and family support trial in Townsville.

Labor will also conduct a study of barriers to veterans' social and occupational rehabilitation and an education campaign for this group.

The trials and study will be developed in conjunction with the ACPMH, and are part of Labor's 'lifecycle' approach to planning mental health services for serving and former ADF members.

The trials will be evaluated by the ACPMH, and will help to improve transition management.

This will build on Labor's proposal to establish an inter-departmental working group to identify ways to streamline the administrative maze faced by ex-service personnel who transition out of defence.

### ***Maintain a separate and properly funded Department of Veterans' Affairs***

Labor understands that the special needs of veterans and the wider ex-service community highlights the need to have and maintain a separate Department of Veterans' Affairs.

### **Recognising courage and sacrifice**

Australia owes a debt to our fighting men and women.

We must strive to ensure we recognise their courage and sacrifice in an appropriate manner.

Where there have been deeds of great courage and sacrifice a Rudd Labor Government will provide proper national recognition.

Labor will also strive to protect the heritage of foreign battlefields where our troops have lost their lives in recognition of their ultimate sacrifice.

A Rudd Labor Government will:

- Form an independent Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal.
- Support the independent review of the gallantry awards for the Battle of Long Tan.
- Provide free Australian flags for families of veterans.
- Declare 'Battle for Australia' day.
- Seek UNESCO Protection for the Kokoda Track.
- Implement Post Armistice Korean Service Review recommendations.
- Declare 'Merchant Navy' day.

- Provide funds to maintain the Ballarat POW Memorial.

### **Formation of an Independent Defence Honours and Awards Tribunal**

A Rudd Labor Government will form a permanent and independent tribunal to consider issues arising in the area of Defence Honours and Awards, to take the politics out of medals policy.

This tribunal will constitute seven members appointed by the Minister.

For each issue, a three member panel will be formed from the appointed seven members.

The Tribunal's decisions will be binding upon the Government. The Tribunal will have matters referred to it by the Minister.

It will also have the power to self initiate investigations if sufficient evidence presents itself.

The Tribunal will be instructed to engage in an investigation of three priority issues, namely:

- Personnel stationed at RAAF Ubon.
- Australian Defence Medal Criteria.
- Merchant Navy, including the US Army Small Ships Sections.

A Rudd Labor Government will also task the Tribunal to investigate other longstanding issues including recognition of:

- 4RAR personnel who served in Malaysia from 1966-67.
- Military Service in Papua New Guinea after 1975.
- Service during Operation Solace.
- Special Air Service – Counter Terrorist duties.
- Peacekeeping Operations since 1975.
- Personnel who took part in the evacuation of the Australian Embassy in Saigon.
- Entertainers in the Vietnam War who went with US concert parties.
- Far East Prisoners of War killed while escaping.
- Cadet Instructors.

Labor recognises that there are many more issues in the area of Defence Honours and Awards. Other matters may be considered in due course.

### **Support the independent review of the gallantry awards for the Battle of Long Tan**

*"I ask or want nothing for myself, simply long-awaited justice for my officers and men who fought so gallantly at Long Tan"*

Harry Smith, Commander of D Company, 6RAR

On 18 August 1966 Delta Company of 6RAR engaged the enemy in the Long Tan rubber plantation under the command of Major Harry Smith.

Eighteen Australian soldiers were killed and 24 were wounded.

Where there have been deeds of great courage and sacrifice Labor will not neglect its duty to promote appropriate recognition.

Labor will also strive to protect the heritage of foreign battlefields where our troops have lost their lives.

A Rudd Labor Government will form a permanent and independent tribunal to consider issues arising within the area of Defence Honours and Awards.

Although the company was outnumbered, and suffered high casualties, Smith and his men inflicted massive casualties on the enemy.

Smith says:

*"...we saved the Task Force Base [at Nui Dat] from what would have been a disastrous attack by the 5,000-strong VC 5th Division, and their influence in the province was reduced thereafter."*

As the commanding officer, Major Smith was responsible for recommending gallantry awards for individual members of his company.

Major Smith's recommendations were held in Saigon for some time and then downgraded before being referred to Canberra.

The Republic of Vietnam sought to award the Cross of Gallantry Unit Citation with Palm to D Company 6RAR, in parallel with a United States Presidential Unit Citation.

The US award was recognised by the Australian Government in 1968.

Labor has a longstanding commitment to conduct a formal and independent review of the gallantry awards and citations made at Long Tan. Labor also supports the award of the *GRVN Cross of Gallantry Unit Citation with Palm* to D Company 6RAR.

Vietnam Veterans, for some time, have been asking the Howard Government to act on this matter.

While the Prime Minister responded positively to a request for re-consideration in a meeting with veterans last year during the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, he then failed to take any positive action.

Harry Smith, the commanding officer during the Battle, said in the *Herald Sun* on this year's anniversary of the Battle that:

*"He [John Howard] promised to look into the medal issue and that he would re-open discussions. When a Prime Minister says something like that to me I believe he should follow through or provide reasons why he hasn't. I haven't heard a word from him."*

The Prime Minister finally announced that a review would take place just two days before he called the election.

Labor will support this review.

### ***Provide free Australian flags for families of veterans***

As a nation, respecting the deeds and efforts of veterans is paramount.

That is why when an Australian veteran dies Labor will make available to their families an Australian flag for use at the funeral ceremony.

Labor believes this is a fitting token of national appreciation.

Guidelines for the Constituent Request Program will be amended so that local members can provide flags to family members or ex-service organisation representatives for use at veterans' funerals, above current restrictions.

***Declare 'Battle for Australia' day***

The Battle for Australia is a significant part of Australia's military history and developing nationhood.

It was a period of intense conflict within the region, with attacks on the Australian homeland, and a series of battles during World War Two from the Coral Sea, along the Kokoda Track, and later at Buna, Gona and Sananda.

The first Wednesday of September coincides with the anniversary of the Battle of Milne Bay in 1942.

A Rudd Labor Government will request the Governor-General to declare a national day of observance for 'Battle for Australia' day on the first Wednesday of September each year.

It will not be a public holiday, nor an alternative to ANZAC Day or Remembrance Day.

***Seek UNESCO Protection for the Kokoda Track***

Kokoda has a special resonance with veterans, their families and the wider community and was strategically vital to our survival during World War II.

To ensure the long term protection of this site, Kevin Rudd committed last January to seek to place the Kokoda Track on UNESCO's official world heritage list, ensuring its protection for future generations. The Howard Government finally agreed to do this also in October.

***Implement Post Armistice Korean Service Review recommendations***

The Post Armistice Korean Service Review was established to examine the level of recognition that service in Korea from 1953 to 1956 should be given.

The review made six recommendations, but the Howard Government chose to ignore four of them.

Under a Rudd Labor Government, Defence will implement all of the recommendations of this review. This will fully support the efforts of the Korea War Veterans Recognition Committee to gain the recognition they deserve.

***Declare 'Merchant Navy' day***

During World War Two, thousands of Australian merchant mariners conducted vital and often dangerous maritime operations, evacuating civilians from threatened areas, and transporting supplies and personnel to and between areas of conflict.

Many paid the ultimate sacrifice. It is estimated that one in eight Australian merchant mariners lost their lives.

3 September marks the anniversary of the first day of World War Two, when the first merchant ship was lost in the war.

A Rudd Labor Government will request the Governor General to declare 3 September of each year a national day of observance to pay tribute to the wartime service of the Merchant Navy in Australia.

Kokoda has a special resonance with veterans, their families and the wider community and was strategically vital to our survival during World War II.

To ensure the long term protection of this site, a Rudd Labor Government will seek to place the Kokoda Track on UNESCO's official world heritage list, ensuring its protection for future generations.

It will not be a public holiday, nor an alternative to ANZAC Day or Remembrance Day.

***Provide funds to maintain the Ballarat Prisoner of War Memorial***

A Rudd Labor Government will provide \$160,000 to Ballarat City Council for maintenance of their Prisoners of War (POW) Memorial.

Labor will also declare the Ballarat POW Memorial to be a national memorial.

**Australian Prisoners of War**

Over 4,000 Australians were taken prisoner during the First World War by the Turks and the Germans.

During World War Two the Axis powers in Europe (Germany and Italy) captured 8,591 Australian personnel.

Over 22,000 Australians became prisoners of war of the Japanese in south-east Asia.

During the Korean War, 30 Australian servicemen were captured by North Korean or Chinese forces.

**What this Plan Means for Veterans**

Under a Rudd Labor Government, the veterans' community can expect that this plan for action will be delivered. This is the first step in a concerted effort to address a range of issues around veterans' entitlements, services, wellbeing and recognition.

The measures in this Plan are worth more than \$900 million over four years:

- \$25.2 million in additional measures for veterans and war widows.
- Measures which were promised by Labor and later adopted by the Howard Government, such as fair indexation and the Vietnam Veterans' Health Study, at a cost of \$152.7 million.
- Coalition initiatives that Labor has endorsed and will implement in government, at a cost of around \$234.6 million.
- Measures from other portfolio budgets such as increased Utilities Allowance, which will provide DVA clients with more than \$482 million over four years on 2006 projections, and increased Telephone Allowance for internet services at \$6.9 million.

**Financial implications**

Labor's Plan for Veterans' Affairs is fully costed and funded.

**FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS – IMPACT ON UNDERLYING CASH BALANCE (\$M)**

	<b>2007-08</b>	<b>2008-09</b>	<b>2009-10</b>	<b>2010-11</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Backdate Widows benefit</b>	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6
<b>ASIST funding</b>	0.0	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.75
<b>Mental health lifecycle package<sup>1</sup></b>	0.70	0.90	0.45	0.00	2.05
<b>Secondary Mental Health Workers</b>	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.0	1.5
<b>ISS extension</b>	0.00	2.63	2.75	2.34	7.72
<b>Automatic War Widow's Pension – TTI and Interm Rate</b>	0.00	1.48	1.48	1.48	4.44
<b>Financial Assistance to ESOs</b>	5.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	8.0
<b>Ballarat POW Memorial</b>	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.16
<b>Total</b>	<b>6.84</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>6.47</b>	<b>5.11</b>	<b>25.22</b>

<sup>1</sup> This package will be jointly funded by DVA and Defence. The figures provided in the table are DVA's contribution only. Defence's contribution will be an additional \$1.6 million.