

stay for the long term once they become aware of the issue – particularly when they later accrue families and wider responsibilities of their own.

The recent ADF recruiting summit achieved broad agreement that the marketing of the defence force in recruiting terms needs to emphasise more than just the jobs or even the careers available. Service in the ADF is a fundamental function of citizenship integral to the well-being and security of the nation, not merely a matter of lifestyle or a temporary economic or employment relationship between the State and individual Service personnel.

Service in the ADF also entails responsibilities, exigencies and risks peculiar to the military profession. Our defence force, of necessity, is an unlimited liability company. Those voluntarily (or compulsorily) undertaking military service have an actual and implied contract with their fellow citizens that they, and their families, will be treated appropriately during their service – and fairly compensated then and afterwards for death, wounds or other disability caused by such service.

Fixing our inadequate or inconsistent treatment of the veterans of previous wars is therefore both a strategic and a moral issue. It is also an issue that is not going away, even as the youngest surviving World War II veterans enter their 80s and the youngest Vietnam veterans approach 60. The operational tempo of the last decade or so means Australia will have tens of thousands of younger veterans for at least five or six decades to come. As demographic pressures continue to shrink the ADF's recruiting pool, and as the population ages overall, we need to ensure that our inadequate treatment of veterans does not persist as a disincentive to ongoing recruitment and retention. ♦

Indexing not the index finger

Another impediment to recruiting and sustaining an adequately-sized defence force is continued strong dissatisfaction about the indexing of ADF superannuation pensions and the various compensation payments to disabled veterans. Both are indexed to increases in the consumer-price-index (CPI) only and fall ever further behind each year. This seems unfair and indeed discriminatory when, for example, various social welfare payments not involving the responsibilities, exigencies and risks of military service to the nation are indexed much more generously – to the higher of CPI increases or increases in male-total-average-weekly-earnings (MTAWE), and with the added safeguard that payments such as aged-pension and unemployment payments cannot drop below 25 per cent of MTAWE.

There is an obvious solution and it is fair, simple and transparent in perpetuity. ADF superannuation and veteran's compensation payments should be permanently indexed by the same method used to index parliamentary pensions. ♦

Disunity and biting hands that try to help

None of this, of course, is meant to imply that the efforts needed to fix the plight of war veterans will be an easy task. It is also a task becoming harder because agreement and unity among veterans is fragmenting not strengthening.

The number of separate organisations representing different types of veteran, different disabilities or other causes is growing regularly. Some of this is a reaction to real and perceived failures in representing particular categories of veteran by the larger and more established veterans' bodies such as the RSL. Other fragmentation stems from geographic, financial and expertise pressures in federal bodies, differing local conditions, political or operational disagreements, and suspicions that some veterans' organisations are now too ossified in their decision-making or too close to the bureaucracy or government to be fully effective lobbies. Some fragmentation is simply the result of personality clashes, irrational resentments, chips on the shoulder about being led again by retired officers, or the simple desire by some individuals to be a big fish in a small pond.

It would also be fair to say that, judging by their public statements and the quality of their research and lobbying efforts, some of the newer and somewhat esoteric veterans' bodies do not seem particularly well organised or led. Nor do they appear objective and informed enough in their public stances to win much public support. This can result in unhelpful contributions to public debate, especially when their input is sought and sensationalised by journalists motivated by a desire to sell newspapers, lift ratings or futher their career, rather than by any real desire to air genuine issues effectively through informed debate.

The Internet has also encouraged direct and independent action by some individual veterans, or small and dispersed groups of veterans who have not previously been able to contact each other easily. In such cases they are often veterans who are ostensibly or actually disappointed with the plethora of existing veterans' organisations. One serious problem resulting is that the emails consequently exchanged often appear to encourage opinions and action without necessarily improving the research and argument involved. In some prominent cases, originators and recipients seem keen to circulate emails for communication but not otherwise use the Web for actual research.

Unfortunately, independent action can be quite counter-productive, especially when emails full of abuse and short on facts, objectivity, context and logical argument are sent willy-nilly to bureaucrats and politicians. One result is that they discredit the veterans' community as a whole. Another is that they discourage negotiation towards a solution of grievances because they offer no reassurance that rational and reasonable interaction is likely. Even more unfortunately, the originators of some emails appear to be suffering the types of psychiatric disability that can hinder effective lobbying because they involve complications caused by PTSD, depression, isolation, paranoia, alcoholism and insomnia – some in combination. As a rough rule-of-thumb the date-time group on such emails can often be a good indication of the cogency of the contents.

But all must be gathered again into the veterans' fold before the lobbying attack can be renewed effectively. Some circuit-breakers in veterans' community organisation and leadership are needed to kick-start the collective and focused effort needed to fix things. ♦