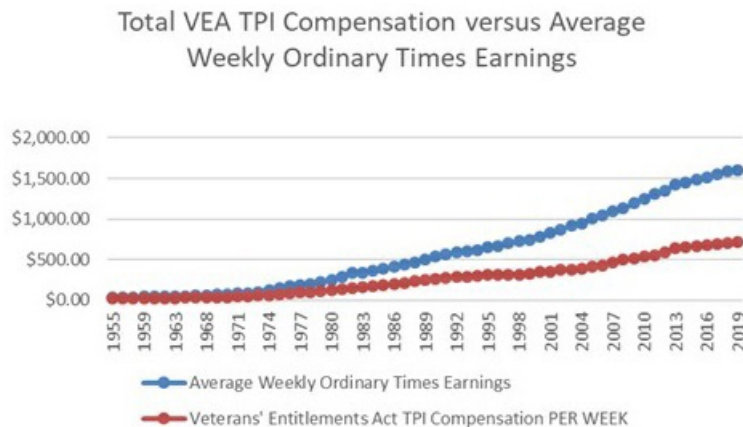


# Veterans sold short in election

The Coalition and Labor offered Australian Defence Force veterans a few token crumbs during the 2019 federal election. Compare the Coalition's \$63.2 million "suite of initiatives" for veterans and Labor's \$118 million "to honour their service and support their families", with the 2019-20 defence budget of \$38.7 billion. And, with bipartisan support, the 2019 Budget locked in a massive \$498 million to redevelop the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Sponsorship of the Memorial by weapons manufacturers BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin and Boeing et al., and Australia's plan to become one of the world's top ten arms exporters by 2028 has bipartisan government approval. But while they glorify war, the recent rising veteran suicide rate is a conspicuous indicator that the major political parties treat our veterans with contempt.



Veterans' Entitlements Act (VEA) totally and permanently incapacitated (TPI) pension rate.

Today, the Special Rate disability pension under the Veterans' Entitlements Act 1986 (VEA) for totally and permanently incapacitated (TPI) veterans stands at \$700.95 a week and fails to match today's minimum wage. It has no real value anymore because it was never indexed against an average adult weekly wage. Military veteran Bert Hoebee raised such matters in an 8 May open letter to Coalition and Labor leaders. Published in the online journal Independent Australia, Hoebee's letter slammed the Coalition and Labor's miserable commitments to veterans. Measures to support veterans "deserve a very high priority—well before any consideration of expenditure on memorials is placed on the agenda", Hoebee stated, after having called for the following measures that any fair government would have implemented long ago:

- a plan to restore a proper level of Totally and Permanently Incapacitated Special Rate (TPI/SR) economic loss compensation payments—it is reprehensible that this particular issue was not dealt with long ago;
- fair indexation for Military Superannuation and Benefits Scheme (MSBS) superannuants also (the now infamous Ronaldson 'second step' was never implemented!);
- fair indexation for under 55-year-old DFRDB [Defence Force Retirement and Death Benefits Scheme] superannuants, let alone anyone on MSBS;
- proper indexation for preserved funds in Commonwealth hands;
- restitution for any substandard super indexation, dating at least back to 1990 for MSBS and 1990-2014 for DFRDB.

In March more than 80 distinguished Australians called to stop the exorbitant War Memorial expansion, including Paul Barratt AO, former Secretary, Department of Defence; Brendon Kelson, former Director, Australian War Memorial; and Michael McKernan, former Deputy Director, Australian War Memorial. Their statement opened: "The Australian War Memorial's \$498 million extensions should not proceed. They cannot

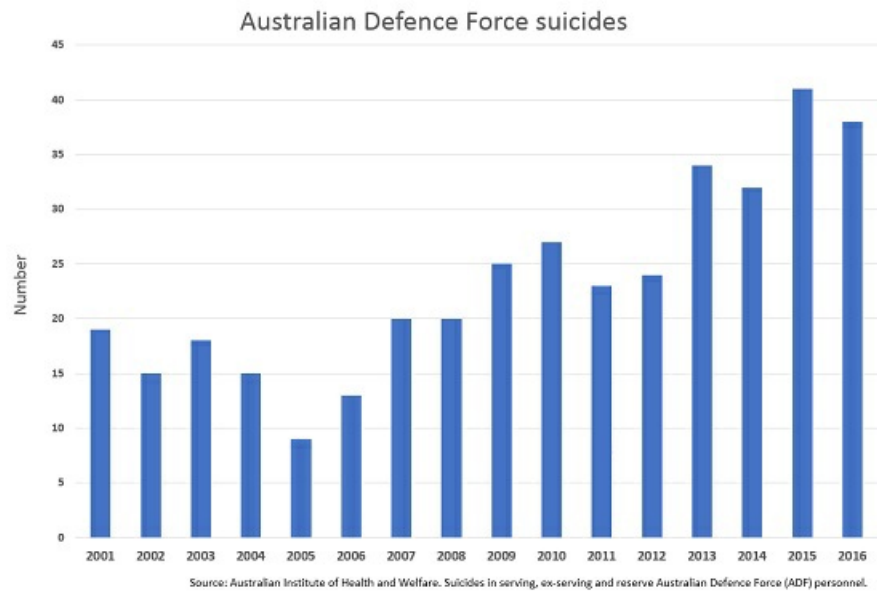
be justified, they show the Memorial is being given preference over other national institutions, and the money could be better spent.” These notable Australians clearly indicated that “direct benefits to veterans and their families” should be prioritised over grandiose monuments.

Considering the soaring suicide rate of veterans, such direct assistance for veterans is long overdue. From 2001 to 2016, there were 373 suicides in serving, ex-serving and reserve Australian Defence

Force (ADF) personnel. Over this 16-year period the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports an alarming rising trend, with nearly two thirds of the suicides being recorded in 2009-16. In 2014-16, ex-serving men aged under 30 had a suicide rate 2.2 times that of Australian men the same age.

A change.org petition by Julie-Ann Finney, mother of Dave Stafford Finney who took his life earlier this year, highlights the suicide crisis: “On 1 February this year, my David took his own life after a crippling battle with Post-Traumatic Stress injury. He desperately wanted to stay alive, but David was failed by a broken system that is seeing more than one veteran a week take their own life. More than one death a week. That’s why I am calling for an urgent Royal Commission into veteran suicide rates.”

While the Coalition and Labor have pandered to the military industrial complex and have supported illegal regime-change wars, they appear oblivious to the plight our veterans. This must end.



An alarming rise in ADF suicides can no longer be ignored.