

Hon John Key

Prime Minister



12 October 2009

Speech

Speech to the Royal New Zealand Returned and Services' Association 2009 Annual Council

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the opening of your RNZRSA National Council.

It is a great privilege to address you as your Prime Minister.

I'd like to acknowledge Robin Klitscher – your national president – and your national executive committee.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the good work that you do – in 250 RSAs, clubs, and branches from one end of the country to the other.

Advocating for the concerns of veterans.

Honouring all those who have served.

And keeping alive the memory of their contribution and their sacrifice.

Veterans matter.

National recognises the special status you have in our Nation's history.

And we recognise the special contribution you have made to our peace and our security, our prosperity and our future.

Today I'd like to touch on some of the initiatives the National-led government is working on that are of interest to the RNZRSA, your members, and all veterans.

But before I do that, I'd like to reflect on some of the events I have been involved in over recent weeks, both here and overseas.

Passchendaele

On Saturday morning I attended the march past and review to mark the end of the exhibition "Passchendaele – the Belgians have not forgotten."

It was an extremely moving event.

Ninety-two years ago today, on October 12 1917, over the period of just two hours, more than 2800 Kiwi soldiers were killed, wounded, or listed as missing in action.

More New Zealanders died on that single day than any other day in our history.

Over the weeks and months of that battle, 5000 New Zealanders made the ultimate sacrifice.

They came from a land at the uttermost ends of the earth to defend a country they had never seen and a people they had never met.

And they did not return.

They gave their lives so that all of us may live in a peaceful democracy.

We must never forget that sacrifice.

The men and women of our armed services and the sacrifices they have made have helped to define how we see our country.

They continue to play an extremely important role today.

Samoa

Last week I visited Samoa in the aftermath of the tsunami to inspect the damage, see how we can help, and express the condolences of all New Zealanders.

I'm very impressed by the job our military personnel are doing to help Samoa in the aftermath of this tragedy.

I spent some time with our air crews, our army personnel, and our navy teams.

It was a great privilege to see them at work – searching for the lost, treating the wounded, counselling the grief-stricken, repairing infrastructure, and ferrying emergency supplies and personnel around the disaster zone.

Many of them were on the edge of exhaustion after working for 20 hours straight.

But they were in good heart.

And they shared a camaraderie that I imagine is very close to the friendship and teamwork you enjoyed when you served.

They are very special people.

As are all the young men and women in our military who we send off around the world to do all sorts of difficult, dangerous, and harrowing tasks.

They don't complain.

They just get on and do it.

And all New Zealanders should be very proud of them.

We have deployed about 100 defence force personnel to Samoa.

This includes army medics and environmental health officers, engineers, and air crew.

It also includes navy divers repairing water pipelines to the islands off Upolu.

We've sent about 20 police officers – specialist search teams, victim recovery dogs and their handlers, and victim identification teams.

We've dispatched around 30 doctors and nurses to help treat casualties and to maintain public health in the disaster zone.

And there are also numerous staff from NZ Aid and non-government organisations.

They are supported by a range of military assets.

Immediately after the tsunami we dispatched an Orion to coordinate the initial search & rescue.

An air force Hercules and 757 have been flying supplies and personnel back and fourth with two Hercules from Australia which were exercising here.

We have stationed two iroquois helicopters on Upolu to ferry people and supplies.

HMNZS Canterbury sailed from Auckland on Saturday morning with a seasprite helicopter on board.

It is loaded with specialist aid supplies and 10 containers of donated goods.

International Efforts

The tsunami relief operation in Samoa is a sign of the changing face of military service in New Zealand.

At present, New Zealand forces are stationed in the Sudan, Sinai, the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan, Korea, East Timor, and the Solomons.

Although we have frontline forces in the field – such as the SAS in Afghanistan – increasingly, the trend over recent decades has been towards more deployments for peacekeeping, for humanitarian relief, and for support of wider international efforts.

In an interdependent and multi-polar world, we can't guarantee our security by aligning ourselves with one nation or one alliance.

We have to play our part in an array of international institutions working towards common goals of peace and democracy.

That's why New Zealand is committed to the United Nations, to other international forums and regional organisations, as well as to bilateral and multilateral relations with our traditional allies.

And that's why you saw me at the 64th General Assembly of the United Nations two weeks ago.

We had a very successful trip.

I spoke with many world leaders in formal bilateral meetings and had the chance to chat twice with US President Barack Obama.

We promoted New Zealand's trade interests.

We advocated for our proposed Global Alliance on agricultural greenhouse gas emissions.

And we launched our bid for a seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2015.

As a small country and one of the UN's founding nations, we have a reputation as an honest broker that can make a real contribution to furthering peace and democracy.

Just last week, Murray McCully and Tim Groser followed up on the work we did in New York with a visit to Washington DC for the United States - New Zealand Partnership Forum.

After the forum, US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, reaffirmed the close friendship between our two countries.

She thanked New Zealand for standing with the United States and the international community in Afghanistan.

And she acknowledged our contribution to maintaining peace and providing humanitarian support around the world.

Too often we forget just how substantial that contribution is.

Over recent years, New Zealand forces have been deployed on so many operations that the number of returned servicemen and women is growing at a faster rate than at any time since World War 2.

This has important implications for your organisation.

And I'm glad that you are addressing that.

Through your Outreach Programme and through the theme of this year's council "Carrying the Flag to All Generations", you are making a determined effort to make your membership more relevant to the younger New Zealanders who serve our country today.

It's great to see that your membership has increased for the first time since 2002.

I salute you in your efforts.

Veterans Policy

The changing nature of military service in New Zealand and the growing number of veterans also has important implications for government policy.

As you know, the National-led government is conducting a defence review.

The Minister of Defence, Wayne Mapp, will be talking about that in more detail tomorrow so I won't go into that today.

But I do want to thank you for the contribution you have made to that review, as an organisation and as individual members.

Your knowledge and insights have been very valuable.

The Minister for Veterans Affairs, Judith Collins, will also be speaking to you tomorrow about our policies for veterans.

Ahead of her speech, there are three or four quick points I'd like to make.

Following the recent changes to the structure of Veterans Affairs New Zealand, we are keen to see it engage more directly with the veterans they serve.

The reports I have seen suggest that there has been good progress in this area and we look forward to further developments in future.

In opposition, National endorsed the Memorandum of Understanding to address the concerns of Vietnam veterans and their families.

In government, we have appointed an expert panel on veterans health, which was one of the recommendations of the MoU.

We are keen to expand the role of the expert panel to consider veterans health issues arising from other theatres in which New Zealand forces have served.

Minister Collins will explore these issues in more detail tomorrow.

We support the review of the War Pensions Act, and we expect the Law Commission to report by the end of the year.

We will consider its recommendations carefully.

We are also making progress on the New Zealand Defence Force Medal.

This is an idea that the NZRSA has proposed for many years and, in opposition, we made a commitment to support it.

The medal will recognise the contribution of all New Zealanders who have served in the regular and non-regular services.

The government has received a report about the medal from the Joint Working Group and our defence and veterans ministers are currently considering that.

We hope to make an announcement soon.

I'd like to thank the RNZRSA for your ongoing contribution to government policy, from initiatives like these through to other areas of government policy that affect veterans.

I know that you meet regularly with the Minister of Veterans Affairs, and we value your input.

I'd like to finish today by touching briefly on other government policy areas that will be of interest to some of your older members.

Wider Government Policy

We have faced some big economic challenges since coming to office – a global recession, rising unemployment, and an increase in the government's deficit and long-term debt.

Our primary focus has been to protect New Zealanders from the sharpest edges of the recession and prepare for future growth

We are maintaining all entitlements to income support.

The government will continue paying New Zealand superannuation for married couples at 66% of the average-after tax wage, paid from the age of 65.

All other superannuation rates will continue to be calculated from this base.

We are also maintaining all war pensions, working for families payments, and benefits.

Meanwhile we are increasing spending on frontline public services particularly in health, education, and law and order, and getting better value for the taxpayer dollar.

At the same time, we are reducing low-quality government spending in other areas to get government debt under control.

In the first six months of this year, we announced the largest ever increase in elective surgeries in our public health system.

We will soon begin building the first of a number of elective surgery super-centres to reduce hospital waiting lists even further.

We have introduced the tough law and order legislation we promised in the election campaign.

This includes stronger bail, parole, and sentencing laws for repeat violent criminals.

We have already recruited over 100 of the 600 extra frontline police officers we promised.

We have also launched a youth opportunities package, which provides up to 17,000 new opportunities for young people through a number of initiatives.

One of these is the expansion of the Defence Force's Limited Service Volunteer programme by 2500 places.

This programme aims to instill self-discipline, confidence and motivation in 18- to 24-year-olds.

Last week I announced a package of measures to tackle P, or methamphetamine.

This is the drug which is destroying the prospects of thousands of young New Zealanders and tearing their families apart.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, every day that I stand up in Parliament to answer questions, I gaze around the House of Representatives.

Carved into the walls are the names of the battlegrounds around the world where young New Zealanders gave their lives.

Behind me the names include Alamein, Crete, Messines, Cassino, and The Pacific.

In front of me, they include Gallipoli, The Somme, Greece, the Battle of Britain, The River Plate, and Passchendaele.

And down the far end – Malaya, Korea, and Vietnam.

As a nation, we owe it to the New Zealanders who fell in the service of their country to never forget what they did.

And we also owe it to the veterans who returned from conflicts like these – and who return from the many operations our armed forces are deployed on today – to remember and respect the contribution they have made to our country's peace and prosperity.

That is the goal of my government.

And with your help, I'm sure it is a goal we will achieve.

Thank you very much and best wishes for your 2009 Annual Council.

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