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War veterans mental health warning

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The country faces a "potential mental health timebomb" when veterans return to civilian life, shadow Defence Secretary Liam Fox has warned.

Representatives from the three main parties took part in a defence debate before an invited audience at the National Army Museum in London on Tuesday evening.

Mr Fox said the fact more veterans of the Falklands War committed suicide than died in the conflict showed the potential impact of war on serving soldiers.

He said: "If you extrapolate that figure through the first Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan and you couple it with the fact we are using the TA more than we did before and people coming home from the TA find themselves even more isolated and vulnerable than those coming back with their regular units, I think we have a potential mental health timebomb that we need to deal with."

Mr Fox said he thought compulsory psychological testing should be brought in for people before they were discharged.

Defence Secretary Bob Ainsworth said the Government was committed to enshrining veterans' rights in law so future administrations would not be able to "walk away" from their responsibilities.

He said: "That is why we have got in the manifesto, the Labour Party manifesto, that we will enshrine a service charter in law.

"That commitment is there and it has to be honoured, not for a year, not for two years but for decades to come."

Mr Ainsworth added that advances in medical treatment meant more veterans were surviving injuries that would have previously killed them.

Former Liberal Democrat defence spokesman Paul Keetch said all three parties agreed more needed to be done for veterans and that his party's manifesto would "enshrine" the military covenant in law.

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