

Aussie combat women

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The Government plans to increase the active involvement of women in combat zones in the Australian Defence Force, putting Australia in line with Israel, some European countries and New Zealand. Women already make up 13 percent of Australia's Defence Force but the move is aimed at improving gender imbalance.

Transcript

ALI MOORE, PRESENTER: The issue of women in the military has long sparked controversy and debate.

Now the Government is taking it one step further by lifting the ban on hand-to-hand combat roles, allowing women to join frontline infantry units including the commandos and the SAS.

The move puts Australia into line with Israel, some European countries and our neighbour New Zealand.

Women currently make up about 13 per cent of Australian defence force personnel and today's move is part of a recruitment drive aimed at improving the gender imbalance. But the critics have come out in force.

Kirstin Murray reports.

STUART ROBERT, LIBERAL MP: Is there where we want our sister and our mothers and our daughters to be?

EVA COX, WOMEN'S ELECTORAL LOBBY: There's something basically ridiculous about it, and patronising about it, about saying: "Oh, you know, we'll let women in here but we won't let them in there."

GREG COMBET, DEFENCE PERSONNEL MINISTER: This is about assessing at the end of the day, anyone's physical capability to fulfil a particular role within the ADF.

KIRSTIN MURRAY, REPORTER: On the parched plains of Afghanistan Australian troops are facing their bloodiest conflict since the Vietnam War.

The image of the frontline digger has always been exclusively male but now the Government's considering a fundamental shift in Defence Force policy that could ultimately see women serve in frontline combat.

GREG COMBET: It's extremely important that we send a signal to women that their role is valued within the Australian Defence Force and their opportunity to participate in occupations is considered on appropriate grounds.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: Women already make up about 13 per cent of the permanent Defence Force ranks, but those 7000 soldiers, sailors and air crew; serving in direct and indirect combat functions in combat units.**

In an effort to boost military recruitment, Defence Personnel Minister Greg Combet's calling for new rules that would apply to every military job.

GREG COMBET: When this work is completed the Government will be in a position, along with the Defence organisation and the defence leadership to make a better assessment of the capability of individuals regardless of their gender.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: Australia wouldn't be the first country to do so. Israeli women have served in frontline units for decades and in country like Canada, Switzerland, Norway, even close neighbour New Zealand, women serve in combat zones.*

But in Australia women have been kept away on the basis they're not strong enough to cope.

STUART ROBERT: If we're going to look at putting women on the frontline we need to make sure we're doing it for all the right reasons, that we're not doing it just because politically it might look good.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: Federal Liberal backbencher Stuart Robert, who served as an infantry officer for nearly a decade before entering Parliament, says Greg Combet doesn't have the experience to mess with military tradition.

STUART ROBERT: When he's never served there, when he's never parachuted in night in the rain, when he's never carried a mortar base plate for 50 kilometres in a route march, when he's never spent nights and nights without sleep, for him to stand there and give his opinion and to push the Government into something is simply outrageous.

GREG COMBET: I'm pretty sure I wouldn't pass too many physical employment standards so I'll cop that one but it's about developing a set of more objective criteria that are relevant to people's capacity to perform a particular role in the ADF.

EVA COX: I think it's time we gave up these 19th century views that women have to either be protected or that their presence is so threatening that they're going to undermine discipline.

NEIL JAMES, AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE ASSOCIATION: *** We're not really worried about this scientific analysis because it's likely to bolster the existing standards rather than weaken them.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: Neil James heads the Defence Association and draws an analogy with premier football codes where women compete in separate competitions.

NEIL JAMES: The idea that you should throw all our females into frontline infantry combat is just as silly as the idea that you can take out half the Wallabies team and replace them with the top female rugby players.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: But NSW Labor MP Linda Voltz, who was one of the first women to join the regular army, says that separation doesn't work anymore.

LINDA VOLTZ, NSW LABOR MP: Traditional warfare meant that there was a frontline where you could define who infantry soldiers are. Modern warfare, where you're dealing with insurgencies means there is no frontline.

So this idea that there's a certain frontline and women would be more at risk there is not necessarily the case.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: US female defence personnel have told documentary makers their countries restrictions don't work on the ground.

They're now relied on to perform tasks men can't, which means they often accidentally end up in battle zones.

SGT. CYNTHIA ESPINOZA, HEAVY EQUIPMENT OPERATOR: First time I got shot at was a serious reality check. I had rounds hit at about six inches above my head.

SHANNON MORGAN, MECHANIC: All of a sudden I looked and everybody was gone. I was the only one in the street, there's insurgents all around me firing at me.

RANIE RUTHIG, MECHANIC: RPGs thrown at us and a couple of grenades chucked at us.

SHANNON MORGAN: Bullets everywhere.

CAPT. ANASTASIA BRESLOW, COMMUNICATIONS: There was a tow missile on top of the Humvee and I asked the soldier, "Well how the heck do I fire that thing if one of you gets hurt?" I felt we needed to know more.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: And when women are involved in combat they're still perceived as more vulnerable than their male counterparts.

REPORTER: When US Army supply clerk Jessica Lynch's unit was captured during the Iraq invasion there was more focus on her than her fellow male prisoners.

She was with a maintenance company that took a wrong turn and was ambushed nearly 10 days ago. Five of her company were paraded as prisoners of war, they haven't been heard of since.

But the CIA found her in Saddam Hospital and as tanks and US marines launched an attack, central command sent in helicopters, army rangers and navy seals.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: There's also the effect on public morale when women are captured.

NEIL JAMES: In the first Gulf War back in 1991 there were some female American personnel, largely helicopter crews, captured by the Iraqis and a significant number of them were raped.

That's a dreadful thing and it's obviously something that needs to be taken into account. ***

EVA COX: If you're in the army - you're in the army. I mean, the way that people who are captured might be treated by other soldiers is really an issue for international rules of war, if anybody is actually going to stick with them.

I think whoever gets to be a prisoner suffers some fairly horrendous type stuff and I just think that's one of the risks you take.

KIRSTIN MURRAY: They're risks some Australian women might be willing to take but if the Government is looking for support from the Opposition it can think again.

The Coalition says it won't support the move and argues the Australian public is not ready to see Australian women take on the military roles currently reserved for men.

ALI MOORE: Looks like a long debate.

Editor's Note: (27 October 2009) The story contained inaccuracies about women in the Australian Defence Force:

***An incorrect comparison between women serving in other foreign defence forces and reported "But in Australia women have been kept away on the basis they're not strong enough to cope". The ABC acknowledges that female diggers do serve in combat zones.**

**** This sentence originally reported "Women already make up about 13 per cent of the permanent Defence Force ranks, but those 7000 soldiers, sailors and air crew are limited to support roles". The ABC understands that women in the ADF are not limited to support roles and do serve in direct and indirect combat functions in combat units.**

*****Due to time restrictions and editing processes, Mr James' comments regarding the possible capture of female diggers on the battlefield were misrepresented. Mr James' comments were originally scripted as:**

"We are not worried by the scientific analysis because we think it's likely to bolster standards rather than weaken them. The problem is when feminists arguing for all jobs in the military to be thrown open to women just because of supposed gender equity they have not moved on either."

“In the battle field these are fights to the death and it’s just not a sporting contest if we are willing to accept that there are no women playing for the wallabies the automatic assumption that this does not apply to the infantry then that is just bizarre the idea that you should throw all our females infantry into front-line battle is just as silly as taking out half the wallabies and replacing them with women.”

“In the first Gulf War back in 1991 there were some female US personnel mainly helicopter crews captured by the Iraqis and a significant number of them were raped. That’s a dreadful thing and it’s something that has to be taken into account. But quite frankly if the female personnel are prepared to take that risk who are we to stand in their way?”

The ABC apologises for the lapse in standards.