



Succession planning

Once again the opinion columns and programs are buzzing on the subject of when the Prime Minister will step down and what this means for the prospect of him being succeeded by the Treasurer.

When the PM should step down or who should be his successor is naturally a matter of considerable political debate. From a broader national interest viewpoint one area is generally neglected in discussions of the issue — that important area of national governance covering the responsibility for ensuring the country is properly defended.

Mr Costello has demonstrated sound instincts on defence in general, especially when compared with most politicians, but his career to date has not provided the opportunity as a minister, frontbench spokesman or parliamentary committeeman to hone these instincts into deeper knowledge and confidence. He is not alone in this regard as the current prime minister for example faced similar hurdles when his government first took office

As Treasurer Mr Costello has been an attentive and diligent member of the National Security Committee of Cabinet at a time when the committee has been the busiest it has been for a generation. His duties as Treasurer have naturally contributed to a degree of healthy scepticism as to whether the defence budget is necessarily as well spent as it could be. Both of these general experiences have allowed him the opportunity to refine his understanding of grand strategy, particularly concerning what Australia may be called upon to do in executing our international responsibilities — and which of these may be beyond our capabilities, or willingness to fund or otherwise suffer.

The Treasurer will shortly present his 10th budget and is obviously keen to explore new fields of endeavour. Other ministers are reported to be interested in the treasury portfolio should it be vacated, including the equally long-serving Foreign Minister. The current Defence Minister has long had an interest in foreign affairs and one no doubt sharpened by his time in defence. If the prime ministership is not to change in the immediate future and a reshuffle of senior Cabinet positions occurred, for whatever reason, one possible option is Mr Costello moving to Defence, Mr Downer to Treasury and Senator Hill to DFAT.

Until the early 1970s it was commonly understood that any serious contender for the prime ministership needed to have held at least two of the three major portfolios of state: treasury, defence and foreign affairs. The long-term national interest would be well served by a return to this convention rather than Cabinet portfolios being allotted more as a result of personality, parliamentary jockeying and party or factional patronage.●

Highlights:

- Peter Costello and becoming a prime minister
- Touted future leaders need to note the Latham lesson
- The promotion of Angus Houston to CDF
- Being a true friend of China rather than just its rulers
- Remember who owns Gallipoli
- Reining in the Anzac Day hype and politicians
- Irony Corner: Moral cowardice, Michael Leunig, liberty and their prices paid in dead diggers

Grounding to lead

In a similar vein, few other touted leadership aspirants within the Liberal and Labor parties appear to have much of a reputation for being interested in defence issues, particularly for other than reasons of transitory political convenience, personal advancement or to project their visibility using a 5-second sound grab on the topical issue of the day.

One apparently ambitious Liberal Cabinet minister often cited for his leadership potential was even bold enough last year to admit no interest in defence issues. While such an attitude is increasingly common among National Party parliamentarians across the board and in the further reaches of the ALP Left, it surely should not bode well for someone supposedly aiming for the highest elected office in the land.

Perhaps all contenders for leadership of political parties expected to form actual or alternative governments should ponder the incident widely recognised as the seminal event that began the collapse of Mark Latham's leadership of the parliamentary ALP, at least in the eyes of the general public. Mr Latham never really recovered from his off-the-cuff remark on radio that he would bring the troops home from Iraq by Christmas 2004 come what may. He certainly never recovered from his subsequent unwillingness to retract it or his apparent inability to coherently justify such an arbitrary decision.

Australians do not worry enough about their common defence on a day-to-day basis and our political class has long grown accustomed to exploiting this. But, in such character revealing moments, Aussie commonsense and gut feel can reassert itself and measure that a leader may not be up for the responsibilities he or she seeks. A solid grounding in defence matters remains one of the acid tests of true national leadership even if political leadership can at times be fluked or faked without it.●

Aberdeen Angus means real meat

The announcement that Air Marshal Angus Houston will succeed General Peter Cosgrove as CDF in early July has been widely welcomed in the manner to be expected. Most commentary, however, has missed some of the real implications involved.

The most important of these is that once again, as with the current CDF, a Service Chief will be promoted into the position. Hopefully this should further demolish the myth that competent Service Chiefs should not become CDF, because they would somehow be professionally unable to objectively assess the needs of their parent Service against the requirements of the other Services and the defence force as a whole.

The second most important aspect is that the ADF will be headed by an officer with genuine joint-Service experience below one-star rank, including both command and operational staff positions. This is a big step forward for a defence force where officer career management in the three Services, and advancement in the defence force, too often still means that the degree of joint experience tends to be inversely proportional to the prospects for promotion.

The strong field of candidates for CDF meant that the government had both the luxury and the challenge of a real choice for once. An equally encouraging related aspect is that the new CDF, like the incumbent, is no bureaucratic "Uncle Tom".

This will be small comfort to those shrinking elements of the civilian defence bureaucracy long accustomed to entrenching their influence, and improperly exercising power, by forcing the Services to fight each other.

Predictably, there was much media comment along the lines that Air Marshal Houston's appointment was despite him standing up to the then Minister on the so-called children overboard issue. As the January issue of *Defence Brief* noted, this was always likely to stand in his favour on any number of grounds, not least because few in the Liberal Party hold any illusions about the previous Minister for Defence.●

Bull\$&# in the China shop

Australia's geo-strategic position poses continual challenges, especially for a Western liberal democracy with a small population occupying a continental landmass on the edge of Asia. We naturally hope to preserve a first-world standard of living and economic and actual independence.

The authoritarian communist regime temporarily controlling China continues to try and prise us away from our natural strategic and moral inclinations, using its increasing economic leverage on our commodity export-dependent economy.

There is currently renewed academic, political and media clamour to the effect that Australia will need to accommodate "China" more. Much of this is not well thought through and shows insufficient attention to the history of both countries.

Such advocates should perhaps also study some lessons from the ups and downs of our strategic relationship with Indonesia. From the 1970s to the 1990s the dominant belief in Australian ruling circles was that the Suharto dictatorship was good for Indonesia, was the best we could expect, was the best for us, and that we should hold our moral nose and just get on with it. And yet despite our accommodations, bordering on outright appeasement at times, relations reached their lowest ebb in 1999 over East Timor — a moral and strategic issue that festered worse and worse over the decades the more it was ignored.

Conversely, the downfall of the "New Order" regime and the growing democratisation of Indonesia have helped both our countries to reach new heights of genuine respect and real and continually maturing co-operation across the board.

There are many obvious parallels to Australia's relationship with China. We should remember in particular to aim for the long term as one day the communist regime will be gone. This is more likely than not to mean that tension-causing issues connected with the regime's legitimacy, or more accurately the lack of it, will largely dissipate. The obvious example is China's threat to Taiwan — which continues to constitute the single greatest potential risk of great-power war in the region and of catastrophic change to the wider international order.

A democratic or democratising China on the other hand is most unlikely to continue to militarily threaten an already and healthily democratic Taiwan. The great irony of the China-Taiwan problem remains that a China most able to tempt Taiwan "back" is the type of China likely to be comfortable enough in itself to "let Taiwan go".

We can best help China become a true and stable great power by taking the long view. In the short term this may mean increased risks. One of these risks is that we should be prepared to stand up to the current Chinese regime, not least on behalf of the long suffering Chinese people. The communist regime should be advised unequivocally that if they use other than peaceful means to resolve their dispute with Taiwan we would be honour-bound to assist the other two great Asia-Pacific democracies, the US and Japan, to defend the fellow democracy of Taiwan from invasion or other military coercion.●

They won, we lost, live with it

Australian desires that the Gallipoli battlefields be listed as a world heritage site, or be preserved as semi-pristine monuments for all time to one of our nation-defining experiences, are fair enough in themselves but need to be kept in perspective.

Roads and other facilities in the area required upgrading not least because of increasing numbers of antipodean visitors. Twenty odd years ago fewer than 100 Aussies and Kiwis turned up there on Anzac Day, including the annual small contingent of officers from both armies serving with UNTSO in the Middle East. In 1995 the service had to be moved from the Lone Pine Cemetery to North Beach to accommodate growing crowds. This year 17,000 attended with all the detritus that such large crowds bring (and unfortunately many dump rather than carry back out because the bins had been removed as a security measure).

Over the next century or more it is inevitable that further changes to the battlefields at Anzac will be required. As in Flanders and northern France the business of life will continue to disinter the bones of the missing. As in France, further opportunities to bury the dead in known graves will arise.

Our requests to Turkey would also carry more weight if the behaviour of visiting Australians was perhaps more in keeping with the reverence required for a Turkish national park containing 113,000 war dead, 65,000 of them Turkish.

Lest we forget, Gallipoli remains Turkish territory and they have been gallant and generous about its importance to the Kiwis and ourselves. Anzac Koyu remains one of the few places in the world officially renamed after a losing invader. We should be grateful and supportive rather than judgemental about Turkish measures to manage the area. After all, in the final analysis, the Turks won and we lost.●

Anzac's all folks

This year's extensive and at times "over-the-top" media and political coverage of Anzac Day commemorations prompts the question why do Australians dwell on the past so much in this regard, especially as the extent of the coverage so outweighs public debate on modern defence issues generally?

On a related point, it is now high time to reverse the unfortunate trend whereby political figures occupy highly visible positions at what should be apolitical national occasions, including Anzac Day and public ceremonies when defence force contingents deploy overseas or return home. The ADF is, of constitutional necessity and by long tradition, an apolitical organ of the state. It defends and serves all Australians equally. At such national events the officiating dignitary should always be the Governor-General, a state Governor or some other apolitical representative, rather than a federal, state or local politician.●

Irony corner

Two days before Anzac Day *The Age* published an opinion article, by the cartoonist Michael Leunig, describing members of the profession of arms as somehow just homicidal maniacs and claiming that honouring our war dead was simply "militarism".●

Defence Brief is a regular update of Australian and regional security issues published by the Australia Defence Association (ABN 16 083 007 390). ADA annual subscriptions include four issues of its 48-page quarterly national journal, *Defender*, and at least eight issues of *Defence Brief*.

To subscribe to ADA publications visit our website at >www.ada.asn.au< or send your details (name, postal address, email address, telephone, etc) to: >subscriptions@ada.asn.au<, (02) 6231-4444 (international 61-2-6231-4444), or PO Box 320, Erindale Centre, ACT, 2903, Australia