



Ministerial reshuffle 1 – Hill's legacy

The long-heralded resignation of Senator Robert Hill as Minister for Defence is the product of political pressures in the coalition government not Hill's performance in the portfolio.

Initial commentaries on Senator Hill's legacy as Minister for Defence have, naturally enough, concentrated on the political aspects of his passing and their supposed meanings for Howard-Costello leadership tensions and associated party-political matters. After all, the ensuing reshuffle has not yet occurred and much media commentary on defence matters these days is by political journalists in the parliamentary press gallery.

The first point to note is that Hill has been Minister for Defence when more than peacetime administration has been required. During his tenure Australia's overseas military commitments have been the busiest and most warlike in scale, duration and intensity since the mid to late 1960s – a situation no Minister has really faced since Sir John Gorton. These commitments have seen the defence force participate in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a large intervention operation in Solomon Islands that fortunately was able to forestall serious fighting, the international campaign against Islamist terrorism, and politically and technically complex humanitarian assistance operations in Indonesia and Kashmir. Senator Hill enjoyed the confidence of the defence force at all levels, and his low-key style, calm manner and obvious dedication to the job have gone down well with the troops.

He has been assisted, of course, by a much more effective military leadership team and departmental Secretary than several of his recent predecessors enjoyed. The continuity offered by a seasoned and interested National Security Committee of Cabinet has also been of considerable assistance. Nevertheless, in the wider strategic setting Senator Hill and the Prime-Minister have worked hard together to bring strategic policy, the ADF's force structure and defence resourcing back towards the coherent alignment that was so lacking for much of the 1980s and 1990s. The task of strategy driving resourcing, instead of vice versa, is not finished by any means but real philosophical and practical progress has been made.

There is much still wrong with Defence but very little of it can be blamed on Hill alone, especially as he inherited a defence force still suffering from decades of under-investment, bureaucratic infighting and contradictory strategic policy.

Senator Hill has noted that the biggest challenge he leaves for his successor is the continuing struggle to adapt Defence's corporate governance and financial reporting mechanisms to the new accrual accounting standards. Fixing these problems really means tackling the deep-seated structural deficiencies in the Department of Defence and its relationship to the ADF.●

Highlights:

- Robert Hill's legacy as Minister for Defence
- Hill's tenure has disguised one ever-worsening problem
- Hill's footsteps: Who will fill them?
- More ill-informed scaremongering on new laws
- Iraq and Afghanistan: Discuss exit strategies carefully
- Cronulla: Policing not politics is the key
- Irony Corner: Kevin Rudd & jobs for the diplomatic boys

Ministerial reshuffle 2 – help needed

Senator Hill's capable record as Minister for Defence, especially his capacity for focused hard work, has greatly disguised the growing problem that the portfolio is now simply too big for any one Minister. The department's broad structural deficiencies and extensive financial management problems are both a cause and a symptom of this excessive ministerial span. Heaven forbid if the next Minister is lazy.

As far back as 1957 the Morshead Committee of Inquiry into defence re-organisation noted that a unified Department of Defence (incorporating the three Service departments and the departments and agencies handling defence manufacturing and procurement) would need oversight by at least three Ministers. For a variety of bureaucratic managerialist reasons, when this reorganisation finally occurred in 1974 only one Minister was appointed. Since 1974 this Minister has been assisted most of the time by the part-time services (and attention) of a junior Minister, although this has occasionally been a full-time position of sorts.

As the ADA has noted in *Defender* and *Defence Brief* for some time what the department needs is three full-time Ministers (along the lines of the UK model) not one and a third. The Minister for Defence must be freed to focus on strategic issues in both the military and corporate governance sense, including the development and implementation of coherent strategic policy and the defence force capabilities needed to execute it over the long term. Given the importance of defence in national terms, the size of the department and its budget, the Portfolio Minister should be assisted by a full-time junior Minister overseeing defence science, technology and procurement matters. A second full-time junior Minister should oversee the day-to-day operational and administrative activities of the defence force, including all the associated personnel aspects.

This would not only increase ministerial grip on the department to the extent required, it would also mean there was a career structure to help groom junior and senior defence ministers. This is long overdue as many of the junior ministers allocated to Defence over the last 20 years have been rather ordinary performers. This situation has often been exacerbated when the talented ones have been quickly promoted to other demanding portfolios where their talents are perceived to be of more use politically.

The high throughput and often indifferent quality of junior Ministers and Ministers Assisting in the Defence portfolio over recent decades has not given the ADF the ministerial oversight its consistent loyalty and professionalism has deserved. This reshuffle should fix this enduring problem by allocating three full-time ministers to the Defence portfolio.●

Ministerial reshuffle 3 – time will tell

There continues to be much speculation on who might be the next Minister for Defence. There is really no point worrying because we will find out soon enough and only one man really knows at this stage.

As the October 2005 issue of *Defence Brief* pointed out, whether a Minister wants a particular portfolio and whether he or she is suited to it are often not high priorities when ministries are reshuffled. This particularly applies to Defence in comparison to the vote-buying or otherwise politically sensitive portfolios.

This said, in choosing a successor to Senator Hill we hope the Prime-Minister remembers a consideration that the ADA raised with him during the November 2001 election campaign. After three episodes in succession, the ADA noted that Defence as a whole, and the ADF in particular, were sick and tired of having Ministers in their obvious final term in parliament and then not even having them very long – what in military terms is described as a ‘terminal posting’. The longevity of Senator Hill’s tenure (almost longer than his three predecessors combined) was a welcome change and he could certainly not be accused of having been in ‘terminal posting’ mode.●

More scaremongering on new laws

Amendments to the *Defence Act 1903* to modernise the sections authorising limited defence force support to the police, during emergencies beyond the latter’s resources, are currently being examined by the Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee. The ADA submission to the committee’s inquiry may be found at: >www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/legcon_ctte/defence/submissions/sub11.pdf<

Some of the public submissions to the committee’s inquiry appear to answer the mystery of what paranoid conspiracy theorists do over the summer holidays.

In the Westminster system, defence forces have been called upon in extremis to assist in the restoration of domestic law and order since the emergence of this model of parliamentary democracy in the second half of the 17th Century. The Riot Act of 1715 was the first statute regulating use of the regular army or militia in supporting civil authority in emergencies. Until the emergence of organised civil police forces in the mid 19th Century the military provided the only disciplined force able to suppress large-scale public disturbances.

To read many of the public submissions to the Senate Committee Inquiry you would think the more than four centuries of legislation, common law precedent, legal doctrine, and judicial, police and military procedures that have been developed to very strictly regulate such assistance had never occurred. The ahistorical approach and ill-informed scaremongering in several of the submissions is disgraceful. Some seem to believe the amendments somehow risk Australian citizens being machine-gunned at random on the streets by ill-trained, uncontrolled and unaccountable soldiery for uttering the slightest criticism of a government decision.

Even submissions from quasi-legal sources, such as some of the civil liberties lobbies, make depressing reading – although the ludicrous claims and accusations made do offer some unintended light relief. The committee is to report by early February. On the basis of some of the ranting submitted they should consider selling tickets for the public hearings.●

Deadlines must not cause dead soldiers

Recently the strategic term ‘exit strategy’ has been bandied about by people who would not be able to recognise one if they fell over it. A similar degree of glib ignorance surrounds cries for strict deadlines to be stated for ‘bringing the troops home’.

In the final analysis all wars are contests of will. Calls to adhere to strict deadlines or inflexible exit strategies are anathema to military and strategic professionals. They understand the many tactical dangers and the strategic blunder involved in letting your enemies know if, when or how you will stop fighting them.

The operational security, morale and welfare of Australian forces deployed overseas should be first and foremost in the minds of all those seeking to debate our international military

commitments. In particular, our troops should never be endangered by thoughtless comments or ill-informed speculation during domestic public debate.

Those fighting our forces are not likely to have a nuanced understanding of Australian politics but they can easily gain a superficial idea of comments in Australia via the world-wide web and satellite television. Thoughtless comments here, especially concerning supposed timings or conditions for withdrawing our troops, can needlessly risk increasing the threat to these troops. This especially applies if those attacking them come to believe, however incorrectly, that such actions would lead to an Australian withdrawal.●

Policing: It’s a force not just a service

Continued public debate in New South Wales concerning the at times violent beachside demonstration at Cronulla on 11 December, and the retaliatory violence in a number of Sydney’s beachside suburbs on the nights following, reinforce the observations made in the November-December issue of *Defence Brief*.

A range of social, cultural and wider political factors, many of them peculiar to or more prevalent in the Sydney metropolitan area, contributed to the clashes and the underlying problems they brought to a head. But the evidence increases that the main cause was insufficient forceful policing at street level. This longstanding and worsening situation is largely due to not enough police overall, although some community policing fads, management tensions within the NSW Police Service and political interference in operational policing decisions have not helped.

The situation is a complex mix of basic community law and order matters flavoured by an undercurrent of the wider challenges facing Australian multiculturalism. National unity remains of obvious importance in the continuing international struggle against Islamist terrorism. Too many forget this.

Achieving such unity without alienating those Australian Muslims who may already be feeling somewhat alienated, however unnecessarily, is a significant national challenge at local, state and federal level. This is especially so in Sydney as the ill-feelings on both sides about ‘Cronulla’ are largely concentrated in, and on, an ethnically, denominationally and culturally distinct segment of Muslim Australians – Shiite families originally from rural Lebanon with strong clan identities and comparatively high rates of involvement in serious crime. That this sub-community is now being widely accused of having little apparent commitment to effective multiculturalism, or to Australia generally, is an irony that should not be lost on anyone.●

Irony corner

Opposition spokesman on foreign affairs and international security, Kevin Rudd (a former diplomat), has voiced apparent outrage at the prospect of retiring Minister for Defence, Senator Robert Hill, being appointed to an ambassadorial-level diplomatic post overseas instead of a career diplomat assuming the appointment.

Many career-professional intelligence officers now await a similar explosion of outrage the next time yet another serving or former diplomat is inappropriately farmed out to a senior position in our intelligence and security agencies.●

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