



Brendan Nelson vaults into the saddle

New Minister for Defence, Brendan Nelson, is certainly tackling the portfolio with gusto thus far. As one of the few defence Ministers in recent times with his political career still filling the windscreen rather than the rear vision mirror of his bandwagon, the odds are his enthusiasm will be maintained. It is, however, early days yet and the real test of the Nelson experiment in Defence will come only after several years in the job. After a much sought after period of stability with Robert Hill, the last thing Defence needs is another short-term incumbency along the lines of the three indifferent ones between Senators Ray and Hill.

Like Defence, his previous portfolio (education) was one often full of arguments based on ideological posturing rather than facts. Brendan Nelson has the reputation of tackling decisions like a physician. Make an initial diagnosis and then undertake tests before carefully coming to a decision. This scientific and mensurate approach will make an interesting comparison to the 'mastering the brief' method usually taken by his predecessor, Robert Hill (a lawyer by training), and also the ostensibly business management approaches by some other recent Ministers.

It will certainly make many Defence bureaucrats uncomfortable, not least because they have grown so accustomed to writing a brief being halfway to getting the decision they desire. A decision-making approach that gives appropriate weight to experimentation and testing will also suit many elements of the ADF and DSTO. It will particularly suit those elements of the Army and the Navy that have used such methods so well since the late 1990s to finally overturn several of the main 'Defence of Australia' shibboleths that perverted ADF force structuring over recent decades.●

A real Tonto follows

Also very encouraging is the enthusiasm and fresh thinking of the new Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence, Bruce Billson. If the two new Ministers can develop confidence in each other and work together well, the portfolio may receive the dual-ministerial team effort it has not had for much of the Howard Government.

With few exceptions combining the Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence portfolio with the Veterans Affairs one has not been a success. In this case, however, there are more grounds for optimism than pessimism.

A successful team effort may also help convince the Prime-Minister of the necessity of allocating three full-time Ministers to the Defence portfolio in the next ministerial reshuffle.●

Highlights:

- Brendan Nelson starts a long race well
- Bruce Billson shaping up as the junior Minister needed
- Army equipment is up to scratch up front but not behind
- The Department of Defence is re-organised yet again
- Sea King replacement decision shows the way ahead
- C-17 aircraft purchase a big win for force modernisation
- Why do our teachers bad mouth defence force careers?
- Irony Corner: Nostalgia for Duntroon, Libya, Leung's sanity and the denial of World War II war crimes

Digger stuff and nonsense

Recent publicity concerning the standard of equipment provided to the Army tended to skirt around the real facts and underlying key issue involved. In part this is due to the initial press reporting being so inaccurate, ahistoric and even sensationalist. It is also partly due to party-political self-interest on both sides of politics.

In regard to their personal equipment, there is no doubt that every soldier in the small forces we have deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan is now very well-equipped, by both Australian historical standards, and in comparison with the US, British and other forces they serve alongside.

The major reason for this high standard, of course, is that these forces are so small. In turn, the main reasons they are so small is that we do not have enough equipment, or soldiers, to effectively deploy and sustain larger forces.

When the equipment issue was recently addressed in a matter of public importance debate in the House of Representatives the ADA found itself in the unusual position of being quoted in support by both Government and Opposition speakers. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly (because they are both responsible for the situation), neither side chose to mention the real issue – the serial under-investment in defence over the last three and a half decades that has so constricted our defence capabilities and strategic options for so long.

Other aspects left unaddressed, for example, are why our mechanised infantry elements in Iraq could not take their own armoured vehicles – because they are not capable of modern battle – and why even the new 'hardened and networked' Army will not have a single Infantry Fighting Vehicle in its inventory.

Detailed ADA comment on this matter may be found at >www.ada.asn.au/latest_comment.htm<.●

Defence re-organises ... yet again

Yet another re-organisation of the Department of Defence was announced in late February. Among aficionados of this historical phenomenon debate is raging as to whether this is the 15th, or only the 11th, major tinkering with the department's overall structure and practices since the integration of the Defence group of departments in 1974. This one is in fact somewhat late as such re-organisations have generally come at only 2-3 year intervals.

As usual this latest revamp cancels out all the bits of the last one that did not work – rather than adopt a first-principles analysis of why such re-organisations are constantly required. The last re-organisation (circa 2002) was primarily the brainchild of the previous Secretary, Dr Alan Hawke, now newly returned from exile in New Zealand.

The last vestiges of Hawke's unsuccessful and unlamented division of defence business into 'Output Executives', 'Owner Support Executives' and 'Enabling Executives' is to depart finally into the night along the well-trodden path of previous managerialist fads.

The term 'ADHQ' has been resurrected after a short hiatus but will now describe only some of the department's central functions (personnel policy, capability development, finance, strategic policy and, last but hopefully not least, joint operations).

The new 'ADHQ' does not include the Service headquarters, DMO, DSTO, and Defence's intelligence and security organisations (DIO, DSD, DIGO and DSA).

There is also to be a new 'Defence Support Group' encompassing a range of corporate support, administrative, health, legal and personnel services delivery functions.

Somewhat strangely, and contrary to ADF doctrine about the component command model, the Navy, Army and Air Force headquarters are no longer included in the new 'ADHQ'. This contrasts with the last two re-organisations which trumpeted that the CDF commanded the ADF using the component model. The 2005 double-hatting of the VCDF as Chief of Joint Operations also fits the new structure in an uncertain fashion. What is certain is that the 1997 Defence Reform Program slogan 'organised for war, adapted for peace' appears to be well dead and buried.

The wiring diagram illustrating the new structure is especially badly set out. Looking at it you would almost think the inclusion of the three Services was an afterthought to consideration of the higher management of Australia's defence, or that intelligence and security were not operational functions.

The new structure has clearly been designed with financial management responsibilities rather than ADF command responsibilities or operational effectiveness foremost in mind. It will not fix the department's fundamental problems: two bosses, no useable delineation between command and administration, no HQADF and no clear chain of military command from the CDF through subordinate commanders to the fighting elements of the defence force. Future accountability debacles like 'children overboard' and 'Abu Ghraib' seem certain.

As one senior and highly respected civilian defence analyst noted to the ADA, the tested New Zealand model of a separate department and defence force (with the CDF as his own 'Secretary' for corporate governance and audit purposes) looks increasingly attractive in comparison.●

Sea King replacement signals way ahead

The ADF currently operates 10 models of helicopter to perform much fewer than 10 types of operational role. This sub-optimal situation is largely the result of two inter-related factors. First, insufficient investment in defence and the short-term thinking this causes has meant numerous, piecemeal procurement projects rather than an integrated long-term approach. Second, old-fashioned, stove-piped, approaches to operations and capability development by the Services, the Defence bureaucracy and defence industry (each for their own reasons) persisted for far too long – and is not entirely eradicated, especially in the latter two.

The modern Joint-Service approach to capability development and operations spearheaded by the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) over the last few years is now bearing considerable fruit, especially as the reconstituted Defence Materiel Organisation has adopted a closely-aligned and similarly holistic approach. This Joint-Service approach will bear further fruit if the strategic policy processes within Defence can be similarly modernised, focused and invigorated.

Quickly replacing the obsolete Sea Kings with the NH-90, the maritime version of the MRH-90 already being procured for the Army (to replace the Iroquois and perhaps eventually the Black Hawk), makes eminent sense. Over the longer term, if the NH-90 proves itself operationally, replacement of the Seahawks with further NH-90 also seems sensible.

A smaller number of proven and modern helicopter types is the obvious way forward. The operational and financial alternatives may clearly be seen in the ongoing debacle of the Seasprite procurement project and in the continuing grief and angst following the Sea King crash on Nias last year.●

Up, up and away big time

The long foreshadowed announcement that the ADF is to swiftly acquire up to four C-17 Globemaster III heavy airlift aircraft is a commonsense development for defence force strategic mobility (and sustainment) around our region and further afield. The main purpose of these aircraft will be to deploy and sustain, easily and swiftly, large numbers of troops, bulkier equipment such as light armoured vehicles and every type of helicopter operated by the ADF.

They can, in emergencies, also carry one Abrams main battle tank each, but it is difficult to envisage an operational situation where this might be necessary. The fact that tanks need to be deployed in at least sub-unit sized groups, and that this normally occurs by rail or ship, will no doubt not stop further silly claims that the aircraft are being procured only so Australia can send its tanks off to US-led military adventures overseas.●

Recurrent prejudices

Based on experiences in his previous education portfolio new Minister for Defence, Brendan Nelson, has suggested that schoolchildren are being actively discouraged from joining the ADF by teachers and guidance counsellors. Considerable anecdotal evidence from defence force recruiting staff, and from ADF members with children in schools across Australia, supports this behaviour and the attitude underlying it.

Wider public debate about Australia's current strategic circumstances and posture is still adversely affected by the lingering persistence of outmoded beliefs forged in the Vietnam War controversies of the 1960s and 1970s. The anti-defence force service attitude exhibited by some teachers is simply another manifestation of this old-fashioned cultural miasma.●

Irony corner

- At a recent press conference to refute claims that diggers deployed to Iraq were having to buy their own equipment the Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy (a 1974 Duntroon graduate), was accompanied by two sergeants recently returned from that country. Their surnames were Moriarty and Crump but neither was prone, blindfolded, carrying a tightly rolled-up newspaper or bruised.●
- In a neat historical turn a visiting official from Libya requested that the SASR assist with the training of his country's Special Forces.●
- Melbourne *Age* cartoonist, Michael Leunig, claimed that some Australians were 'pro-war' and that they '... have been very vicious and personal in their attacks, dirty tricks and campaigns against individuals'. He also claimed 'I don't think the same has happened from the anti-war side', and that he had been 'subjected to a long-running campaign against his anti-war position, a frequent theme for his cartoons'.●
- The discredited British historian, Dr David Irving, was imprisoned in Austria for denying that Germany committed major war crimes in World War II. On the other side of the world, and almost on another planet, senior Japanese officials continue to visit and otherwise endorse the Yasukuni Shrine – which includes numerous historical exhibits glorifying, denying or obfuscating comparable Japanese crimes against humanity in the same war.●

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