



## Chewing the wheat rather than the waffles

The report of the Cole Commission of Inquiry is eagerly awaited by all but the most cynical. On both sides of politics are many who believe vindication is at hand for their team. As an apolitical body the ADA remains disinterested in all aspects bar four.

First, the clear failure of bureaucratic oversight within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is yet another example of the difficulties of reconciling oft-competing functions within a single department of state. Tensions between trade imperatives and wider international obligations in this case mirror similar perpetual and perhaps irreconcilable tensions between the law enforcers and the revenue raisers within Customs, and the law enforcers and the nation builders within the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.

Some might even include the continual grinding clashes between the worst-case pessimism that drives much capability development thinking in the defence force, and the optimism and wishful thinking underlying many penny-wise-pound-foolish quasi-business practices in the Department of Defence.

Second, few seriously doubt that there has been a significant failure of wider governmental oversight. It therefore seems a pity that neither the then Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, nor the then International Adviser to the Prime-Minister, have been called before the inquiry to shed more light on the workings of the formal and informal linkages between the bureaucratic and ministerial levels of accountability and responsibility.

Third, the AWB affair points to an obvious failure in function by the otherwise generally quite successful National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSCC) under the present government. There are also obvious deficiencies in its primary supporting intelligence mechanism (ONA), and the lack of adequate executive and planning mechanisms is again highlighted. In military terms, the NSCC has an intelligence staff (even if one masquerading as an intelligence agency) but no dedicated strategic-level operations or plans staffs to directly execute or co-ordinate current and future activities. The case for buttressing the NSCC with a proper National Security Council (of which ONA would form the intelligence staff) grows ever stronger.

Finally and most importantly, the juxtaposition of AWB Limited deliberately evading the very UN sanctions that the ADF was enforcing on Australia's behalf is a legal and moral issue of fundamental import. And one entirely separate from party-political debates about whether bribery, kickbacks or other measures can or cannot be justified in protecting market share against unscrupulous international competitors. Heads still need to roll over this failure to support the defence force.●

### Highlights:

- Cole: Some structural and national security implications
- Mark Vaile: overwork, inattention or no interest?
- West Papua: A debate becoming trapped by short-term and inelastic strategic perspectives
- South Pacific interventions: 1987 and 2006
- Solomon Islands: A long haul but not for the military
- Could an F-35 end up more expensive than an F-22A?
- Irony Corner: A white camp oven calls a kettle black

## Veiled speech

During some 90 minutes of testimony before the Cole Inquiry the Minister for Trade stated some 44 odd times that he was unable to recall the circumstances of the situation posed by examining counsel.

Given that he is also the Deputy Prime-Minister, and a member of the National Security Committee of Cabinet, many might have assumed that Mr Vaile would have been the one best placed to connect the dots and warn of the serious contradictions between Australia's trade and defence activities in Iraq.

Perhaps his disappointment in this regard was the result of him being, in his own words, 'snowed under'. Hopefully it was just not another example of this Deputy Prime-Minister's uniquely marked lack of interest in defence issues.●

## Good fences and good neighbours

Much commentary on West Papua over recent weeks has been overly single-minded or has adopted quite constrained timeframes. There are strongly competing strategic perspectives and moral stances but few seem willing to acknowledge the many nuances of this complex issue. Among pro-Papuan viewpoints there is usually too little weight given to the frequently difficult Australia-Indonesia strategic relationship and the fact that we will be neighbours in perpetuity. In the opposing 'realpolitik' school there is too often a disturbing dearth of historical knowledge. In both camps there is also a tendency, however subconscious, to ignore inconvenient facts.

Moreover, those advocating West Papua's continuance as an Indonesian entity, its separation as an independent state, or some form of compromise in between, all appear to be overly optimistic as to the ability of the Indonesian and Australian governments to actually control events, especially over the long term. Considerations as to whether West Papua could be a viable country or not, or difficulties for the wider Australia-Indonesia strategic relationship, may become swamped or swept aside by unknown or unforeseeable events beyond our control.

Who can really say, for example, what the sovereign status of West Papua will be in 20 years, or 50 or a 100? Indeed the same questions could be posed with only marginally less certainty about Indonesia and even Australia. With the same long view, who can guarantee that current international fashions as to the supposed inviolability of international boundaries inherited from colonial structures will persevere or that, however unlikely, a future UN might not somehow eventually revisit the widely discredited 1969 Act of Free Choice. It is also not impossible that the 1951 Refugee Convention will be renegotiated generally. It is also possible that Australia might be forced one day to withdraw from the Convention because one of its central operating principles is joint regional initiatives but, in our wider region, only ourselves and New Zealand are actually signatories.

Such developments seem unlikely now but who can categorically deny that if Indonesia truly democratises it will inevitably reach a point eventually where it become more not less likely to consider different constitutional relationships with West Papua. After all, in Indonesia's foundation constitutional debates in 1945 leading Indonesian nationalists such as Dr Mohammad Hatta (later Vice-President to Sukarno 1945-48 and 1950-56) noted that Indonesia had no legitimate claim to West Papua.●

## Dancing with the right steps at last

When deploying two rifle companies to Solomon Islands to assist RAMSI and the Royal Solomon Islands Police restore law and order the Prime-Minister noted, ‘... in these situations it’s better to have more than less. I believe very strongly that one of the reasons why our initial intervention [in 2003] worked effectively was that it was very big and it sent a very strong message. It’s far more desirable to deter troublemakers in a situation like this than to fight a pitched battle. And if they think there’s overwhelming force, they won’t try trouble in the first place’. Opposition Leader Kim Beazley has also applauded the move.

Although this is essentially an aid-to-the-civil-power (ACP) task the diggers have deployed in strength, and fully kitted and spurred, so as to more easily restore public confidence and deter potential troublemakers in a volatile, unpredictable and sadly unforeseen situation. This includes both rifle companies taking their organic automatic weapons, which traditionally are not used in ACP operations. The decision to deploy fully armed is due to the high-powered military-style weapons still held by remnants of the illegal and ill-disciplined militias that necessitated RAMSI’s initial intervention to help restore the rule of law.

These sensible decisions concerning sufficient troop strengths and appropriate weaponry, and their approval by both sides of politics, will hopefully cancel out once and for all the disgraceful and highly damaging precedents of Operation *Morrisdance* in 1987 following the first coup d’état in Fiji. While this is nearly two decades ago the bungling of the management of this operation at the politico-strategic level, and further civilian bureaucratic interference in the tactical details of planning for similar contingencies well into the mid 1990s, cast a long shadow. The incident was a particularly corrosive contributor to poor Public Service – Military relations for years afterwards and aspects lingered well into recent times.

Operation *Morrisdance* occurred before HQADF (nominally created in 1982) was properly staffed and resourced, and took over control of all joint operations in 1989. The operation included the deployment of a single rifle company to marry up with the several Australian warships, coincidentally in Fiji waters, for a potential Services-Protected-Evacuation (SPE) of foreign tourists. It was feared that such a task might be resisted by heavily armed, combat-experienced and mutinous Fijian soldiery.

It was lucky an SPE was not in the end necessary because senior Department of Defence officials and ministerial advisers decreed, in the Minister’s name, that no more than one rifle company could be used because more than that might somehow be ‘provocative’. They also specified that no automatic weapons were to be deployed – despite the high risk of actual combat with well-armed professional adversaries.

When he subsequently visited the company on its return to Townsville several diggers personally and vigorously tackled the Minister about the idiocy of the constraints. With the confidence of youth they were more upset by the ban on machine guns than the lack of adequate numbers to secure their potential objectives without unnecessary fighting or casualties. Mr Beazley advised he knew nothing about either decree.

The incident reflected badly on all concerned in Canberra: high-ranking ADF officers for not checking the purported ministerial directions were dinkum and getting them overturned anyway; senior civilian officials and ministerial advisers for their high-handed, amateurish and dangerous interference in military professional matters; and the then Minister for allowing this debacle to occur without him apparently knowing about it.

Thankfully all the right lessons seem to have been eventually learned – and by all concerned.●

## Samting bilong mipela

Australia and New Zealand are in Solomon Islands and indeed in Melanesia generally for the long haul. We are the friend of last resort. No-one else has sufficient capacity or strategic interest in helping our struggling neighbours to adapt. Rightly or wrongly the wider international community views this as primarily our problem.

Defence force efforts are only part of such assistance. Police assistance with law and order and general governance assistance are both far more important over the long term.

As the RAMSI experience thus far shows, helping our South Pacific neighbours to rebuild the structures and outward forms of governance is not enough if there is not accompanying cultural change among those doing the governing. Effective economic and social development, especially at village level throughout these countries, means real change and a need to encourage societies to fully embrace such change.

No matter how clean the elections, forming governing coalitions through backroom bargaining that is easily manipulated by urban and westernised elites remains part of the overall problem. The same type of regime can too easily remain in office and hinder real reform. Genuine regime change from within will be difficult but must be encouraged. Self-interested accusations of ‘neo-colonialism’ and ‘paternalism’ directed at Australia and New Zealand for helping such change are to be expected from the ascendancy classes necessarily dispossessed.●

## JSF versus Raptor debate bubbling over

Recent public hearings, by the Defence sub-committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into Australia’s future air combat capability, unfortunately occurred a fortnight too early to benefit from the release of new and highly relevant information from US Government and commercial sources. In particular, the US General Accounting Office has reported some highly interesting data as to the current and projected comparative costs of the F-22A (Raptor) and the F-35 (Joint Strike Fighter) programs, the technical and financial risks in the latter, likely delays in F-35 production schedules, and the risk of the USAF ending up with much lower numbers of F-35s than originally envisaged.

No doubt the Minister for Defence is taking a close interest in the reports. The only real objection to seriously considering the purchase or lease of at least some F-22A Raptors has been the significant additional cost thought to be involved, although other arguments of varying validity are regularly floated. If the costs converge as much as GAO (and Congressional) reports predict, then genuinely asking the US if they would sell or lease some Raptors to us becomes a question at least worth asking – and asked honestly.●

## Irony corner

Former Department of Defence deputy secretary Hugh White, a great champion of the unchanged, early-1970s, diarchical structure of that department, has described the defence force as an ‘... organisational throwback to the pre-Thatcher, pre-privatisation days of government-funded, bureaucratically managed public services – like the old Post Master General’s Department, or the Commonwealth Bank of the 1950s’.●

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