



Labor's new national security team

Kevin Rudd's election as federal Opposition Leader resulted in some major changes to Labor's frontbench team on the defence and wider national security front. These largely stemmed from the paucity of Labor frontbenchers with a good background (and much interest) in defence and foreign affairs issues. This also needs to be seen against the background of Kim Beazley's return to the shadow defence portfolio in 2004 to cancel out Mark Latham's gaffes in such issues – and his visceral and uninformed anti-Americanism generally – which so savagely undermined public confidence in Labor and contributed so much to its 2004 election defeat.

The elevation of Rudd and the retirement of Beazley to the backbench (and from Parliament at the next election) meant the move of former defence spokesman Robert McClelland to the foreign affairs responsibility was a near certain bet. Although one or two members of Labor's Left faction fancy themselves as foreign affairs experts it is far too dangerous politically to take such a risk, especially with an election looming and at a time when Australia (and our closest allies) are fighting several wars.

Kevin Rudd's grasp of international strategic matters is excellent and his general instincts on defence issues are good. His knowledge of the detail in defence matters is better than most parliamentarians but by no means comprehensive. This will put considerable pressure on Labor as both new shadow spokesmen on defence are effectively neophytes in this regard. Furthermore, Rudd's recent off-the-cuff remark about "large savings and efficiencies" to be found in the "massive defence budget" indicate some need for deeper reading before further public comment on defence force capability development matters.

New Defence spokesman, Joel Fitzgibbon, was a key player in Rudd's elevation but is regarded by many in caucus as someone who needs to prove himself in a difficult portfolio. Alan Griffin has retained his responsibility for veterans affairs (where he is better regarded in the veterans community than most politicians) and has picked up the "Minister Assisting" responsibility for defence personnel and science issues. Responsibility for defence procurement matters has transferred to the senior spokesman. Fitzgibbon and Griffin will need to work closely together to improve Labor's traction in defence debates, something that did not occur enough with their predecessors.

Graham Edwards remains the Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for defence (and veterans) issues and provides some continuity and depth – but only to the next election. As the only combat veteran among our 226 federal parliamentarians Edwards provides a literally unique perspective among our MPs and senators. With his impending retirement and unless another veteran is elected next year, the next Parliament might be the first one in nearly 90 years with no war veteran among its members.

In broader national security terms there is better continuity and less obvious risks. Arch Bevis remains spokesman for homeland security. Tony Burke has had responsibility for integration and citizenship added to his immigration responsibilities and this signals some fresh Labor thinking on the multiculturalism versus national unity front. Joe Ludwig remains justice and customs spokesman. Both Burke and Ludwig have performed well in parliamentary committee work on national security matters and have contributed to mature all-party consideration of potentially controversial issues. The new shadow attorney general, Kelvin Thomson, will hopefully adopt more of a realistic and considered approach to new national security legislation during wartime than did his rather unimaginative predecessor, Nicola Roxon.

Because both Joel Fitzgibbon and Alan Griffin sit in the lower house it is likely that the Opposition Leader in the Senate, Chris Evans, will need to represent Labor on defence issues in that Chamber and help with Estimates Committee oversight. Evans was Labor spokesman on defence in 2001-04 and is the only one of the eight Labor frontbenchers in the Senate with experience of portfolio-level responsibilities in defence matters. Joe Ludwig (a former Army Reserve officer) remains a possibility. Among Labor senate backbenchers, Steve Hutchins and John Hogg show promise in this regard and, of course, the very experienced Robert Ray and John Faulkner remain in general support.

Finally, especially where foreign affairs and defence matters are concerned, it is worth reiterating key lessons of the Mark Latham experiment discussed in the Spring 2005 *Defender*. Potential prime-ministers need a broad grounding in at least two and preferably three of the principal offices of state: Treasury, Defence and Foreign Affairs. Rudd has much better credentials in this regard than Latham did and is a much more stable personality. The ambitions of Julia Gillard, however, indicate potential vulnerabilities for Labor over the longer term. Gillard is not known for expertise or interest in defence and foreign affairs matters. Her previous closeness to Latham's views and general factional loyalties also cause some caucus unease in this regard.●

What Beazley's departure may mean

Few seriously doubt that Kim Beazley is among the top half dozen or so Ministers for Defence since federation. But for all his experience in many defence matters, Beazley's outlook on contemporary defence issues was often overly influenced by his time as Minister for Defence nearly twenty years ago in the final stages of the Cold War. His departure from the scene is likely to clear the way for fresh Labor thinking on some key national security issues.

Beazley was somewhat prone to misunderstand the modern joint-Service approach to command, strategic policy formulation and capability development – based on his experiences of single-Service rivalry in the 1980s and the civilian bureaucratic habits that exacerbated it. Kevin Rudd has no baggage in this regard.

As one particular example, Labor's vague objection to the procurement of 2-3 new medium-sized amphibious ships is likely to dissipate. For personal and ideological reasons rather than real practical objections, Beazley was tempted to argue for an alternative of 4-5 smaller and much less capable ships instead. This runs contrary to all serious naval (and wider ADF) professional advice and is also generally opposed by anyone with expertise in the through-life financial costs of defence platforms. Rudd is likely to junk the smaller ship notion.●

Highlights:

- Rudd's new defence team: Somewhat of a gamble?
- Beazley's departure: The effect on Labor defence policy
- Pre-selection squabbling shoots parties in the foot
- Latest Blackhawk tragedy strengthens case for LHDs
- Why buy Super Hornets but not Raptors?
- Singapore ignores Australian commentators
- Irony Corner: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad strikes again

Select few becoming endangered species

Since its foundation in 1975 the ADA has established a reputation for maintaining an independent and non-partisan stance and avoiding involvement in the internal affairs of political parties. But one recent trend in the coalition parties necessitates some ADA comment – threats to the pre-selection of parliamentarians with an all too rare interest and expertise in defence and wider national security issues.

In the NSW National Party, Senator Sandy Macdonald has been the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Defence since January 2006. Before this he was a committed member of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT) and the parliamentary committee supervising the intelligence and security agencies. In a party increasingly uninterested in defence issues, and often markedly so, he has stood out to the contrary. The NSW Branch of the National Party recently relegated him to a spot on their joint Senate ticket with the Liberals that is effectively unwinnable.

In the NSW Liberal Party, there have been attempts to relegate Senator Marise Payne to a more precarious spot on the joint ticket. Payne has excelled on the JSCFADT and the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee. She has also been a particularly effective Chairwoman of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee, especially during the difficult task of maturely reviewing new counter-terrorism legislation and achieving all-party consensus amidst genuine, and contrived, political and public controversy.

In the WA Liberal Party, Dr Dennis Jensen, MP, was strongly challenged for pre-selection. Jensen has a very strong interest in defence issues (his maiden speech was commended in the November 2004 *Defence Brief* and is available on his website). He is the only member of parliament with good scientific qualifications in, and knowledge of, modern defence technologies. He survived the challenge but only after the intervention of the prime-minister and other party heavyweights.

From the national interest perspective, and particularly concerning their sterling practical work on intra-party policy and all-party parliamentary oversight committees, it seems a great pity that parliamentarians with a genuine interest and demonstrated expertise in defence and wider national security issues are so vulnerable to internal party brawling. Surely there are enough time-servers in all parties who could be retired instead.●

Blackhawk tragedy strengthens LHD case

The crash of an Army Blackhawk helicopter whilst landing on HMAS *Kanimbla* off Fiji tragically resulted in the death of its pilot and one of the SAS troopers onboard. It also caused further operational complications for the offshore evacuation contingency involved.

These complications and the accident itself have, however, brought several force structure and operational issues into even sharper relief. Most importantly they further strengthen the argument for the new medium-sized amphibious ships (LHD), due to enter service from 2010 onwards, and weaken the alternative belief that 4-5 smaller amphibious ships might be better than 2-3 larger ones.

Whichever of the two LHD designs is chosen, they will have much greater all-round capacities (including for the launching of evacuation operations and the recovery and transport of evacuees). The new LHDs will have significantly bigger flight decks, comparatively smaller superstructures and much bigger and more accessible hangarage than *Kanimbla*, *Manoora* and *Tobruk*. The bigger and much clearer layout of the flight decks also enables a much improved degree of omni-directional flight in emergencies when launching and recovering helicopters.

These features mean that the new LHDs can carry, operate and deploy many more helicopters and troops, and do so much more safely, than all our existing helicopter-capable ships of all types. Smaller amphibious ships would simply replicate the operational, logistic and safety problems of the existing LPAs.●

Hornets nest swarming

The August 2006 *Defence Brief* predicted the procurement of F/A-18F Super Hornets as an interim measure to help the Air Force bridge the ever-lengthening period between the precipitate retirement of the F-111s and the optimistically planned introduction of the F-35 Lightning II (Joint Strike Fighter). This was officially denied at the time but has since been admitted – as the JSF program faces more delays.

Just how interim such an option might be is problematic. This is particularly the case given the technical and financial risks of the JSF project, the beleaguered program to upgrade and extend the life of some of our existing F/A-18 Hornets, and the uncertain future of adequate defence resourcing over the long term if our national economic circumstances deteriorate.

The Super Hornet is effectively a third-generation fighter with some lower-end, fourth-generation, capabilities. Moreover, on publicly released costings from the Air Force and Defence, each Super Hornet will apparently cost more than their claimed unit cost for each Lightning II (a fifth-generation aircraft).

It remains quite possible, of course, that our procurement of Lightning IIs will be even further delayed and/or the numbers we buy will have to be cut significantly – especially if, as many in the US believe, USAF and USN procurement is cut back dramatically. Australia could then end up, for the first time ever, not possessing much of a technological edge, if any, in air superiority and strike capabilities in the near and wider regions. Such an edge is strategically vital given our limited numbers of aircraft and continental-sized defence challenges.

The F-22 Raptor is the only true fifth-generation aircraft flying and is already in USAF squadron service. A Raptor costs only marginally more than a Super Hornet or Lightning II but has yet to be fully cleared for lease or sale to non-US customers. As a long-term plan, procuring less Lightning IIs and buying some Raptors instead is becoming steadily more attractive on strategic, operational, technical, financial and overall risk management grounds. Even in the short term, rather than buying Super Hornets as an expensive interim measure, we should instead invest the money directly in replacing some of our existing Hornets with Raptors. Actually asking the US if we can lease or buy some Raptors is now urgent.●

Appreciation brings tanks

Singapore is replacing its AMX 13-SM1 light tanks with 66 refurbished Leopard 2A4 main battle tanks purchased from Germany, together with another 30 un-refurbished ones as spare parts. The Singapore defence ministry noted that the tanks “represent a significant enhancement in the army’s capability”.

It would seem that Singapore too has had the temerity to ignore all the opinion articles in the Australian press by armchair strategists suggesting that modern main battle tanks are somehow thoroughly unsuitable for use in the region.●

Irony corner

Khaled Mahameed, an Arab who runs a museum in Nazareth geared to explaining the 1940-45 Holocaust to Arab audiences, was denied a visa by Iran when he applied to attend Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s international conference of holocaust “investigators” (deniers) in Teheran.●