



## Our election and our Iraq commitment

For some time the ADA has been pointing out that the differences between the Coalition and Labor concerning withdrawal from Iraq are largely more apparent than real.

Both sides of politics are trying to broaden their appeal while still satisfying core constituencies in the electorate, the media and the commentariat. For every Coalition figure alleging Labor's policy is 'cut and run' there is a Labor one alleging that Coalition policy means 'quagmire'.

But as the ADA has noted many times since the last federal election in 2004, the only significant difference on the Iraq commitment concerns the future of the Australian Overwatch Battlegroup (OBG) stationed at Tallil in southern Iraq. Many believe that Labor lost the last election on 23 March 2004 when then Labor leader, Mark Latham, made his off-the-cuff remarks on Sydney talkback radio to announce a policy of unilaterally withdrawing from Iraq by Christmas (before the Shadow Cabinet had even discussed the issue).

In the Spring 2005 issue of *Defender*, following publication of *The Latham Diaries*, the ADA recounted discussions with senior Labor figures during this period concerning the need to avoid strict deadlines because it unnecessarily endangers the troops, and how it would be unlikely that any Australian government would withdraw the other elements of the Iraq commitment for a mix of strategic, practical and policy reasons.

As the ADA also noted then, and many times since, our commitment to Iraq is primarily driven by national strategic imperatives not domestic party-political concerns. This is as it should be as it would be unthinkable that any Australian politician would stoop to risking the lives of members of the ADF for mere party-political advantage.

Both sides of politics have agreed to at least one further rotation of the OBG in southern Iraq during early 2008. Consequently, no matter which party wins the federal election this year, the decision on withdrawing (or further rotating) the OBG will be primarily influenced by the operational situation on the ground in Iraq in mid 2008, by the need to not let our major ally down (involving strategic, diplomatic and moral considerations), and by the need to keep helping secure the US-led coalition's eventual main withdrawal route out of Iraq.●

## New territory, new testing of old limits

The federal government's extraordinary intervention in several Northern Territory Aboriginal communities has bipartisan support among the mainstream political parties but has attracted wider political and social controversy. The use of defence force elements in the intervention has involved the ADF in this disputation for reasons both justified and unjustified. Neither cause is ideal.

### Highlights:

- Withdrawal from Iraq: The realities not the rhetoric
- ADF support to the Northern Territory intervention
- Why a major general should not head the intervention
- Flogging defence land for political gain is shortsighted
- Irony Corner: Senator Lyn Allison and the dangers of the Kokoda Track

It is not unusual, of course, for federal or state governments to call on ADF assistance in national emergencies. The two most common criteria governing the provision of ADF assistance are that the resources of the civil community are exhausted and require supplementation (as with natural disasters such as bushfires, floods and earthquakes), or that capabilities peculiar to the ADF are required (as with open-ocean search and rescue).

The military assistance rendered to civil authorities falls, constitutionally and professionally, into two definite categories: force and non-force situations. ADF use of force to aid civil authorities enforce law and order is extremely rare and has only occurred three or four times (all cases of riot) since federation. Non-force assistance covers everything else including bomb disposal, firefighting, search and rescue, logistic, communications or ceremonial support to events from the Olympic Games down to local fetes, infrastructure construction in remote communities, and the continuance of essential services during natural disasters or (very rarely) prolonged industrial action.

This history, and the well-established bodies of law and professional procedure applying, have not been reflected in media coverage and other commentary on the intervention. Most of this appears accidental ignorance but some seems deliberate.

Some of the initial media reporting and public commentary referred to the intervention as an *invasion* and sought to highlight the involvement of the defence force to emphasise this partisan viewpoint. In some cases this degenerated into outright scaremongering and tragically caused some members of the communities concerned to believe, wrongly, that the Army was somehow coming to remove their children by force of arms.

Unfortunately, much of the commentary appears to have come from journalists and polemicists with little knowledge of the ADF, the Northern Territory or the law. It has missed the essential point that the ADF is only providing logistic and administrative support to what is a whole-of-government effort.

Furthermore, most of the commentary has ignored that the ADF, particularly the Army, has been working in outback Aboriginal communities since before World War II. Army surveyors mapped most of Northern Australia from the 1920s to the 1980s. The Navy's coastwatcher networks have utilised Aboriginal members for nine decades. Various Army Reserve medical units have conducted their annual camps helping outback Aboriginal communities since the early 1950s. The Army's various regional force surveillance and regional intelligence units across northern Australia have similarly had many Aboriginal diggers since the late 1970s. Army engineers have been building houses and environmental health infrastructure in such communities, and running associated trade-training schemes, for nearly a decade. Since the early 1990s many ADF members have studied Aboriginal culture in detail on cross-cultural awareness courses at Nungalinga College in Darwin.

In May 2006 the then head of the Northern Territory branch of the Australian Medical Association called for an ADF 'peacekeeping force' to be deployed in especially violent and dysfunctional Aboriginal communities such as Wadeye (Port Keats). His opinion was that the breakdown in civil society was such that ordinary law enforcement could no longer cope and that especially forceful measures were needed. The ADA noted at the time that perhaps those calling for such measures should go away and read the Commonwealth Constitution.

Within Australia responsibility for domestic law enforcement is always a civil responsibility, even in situations such as riots or certain counter-terrorist incidents where the police may call for armed ADF assistance. An irony about the current intervention is that many of those condemning it, and scaremongering about the ADF's involvement, volubly backed the AMA's call for a military 'peacekeeping force' in mid 2006.●

## Keeping it civil in cases of controversy

**G**overnments of all political persuasions need to take great care not to risk the acknowledged and respected apolitical status of our defence force in Australian society. This underlies the historic reluctance to use the ADF in controversial activities such as domestic law enforcement and strikebreaking.

Much of the intervention in the Northern Territory is currently headed by a serving senior Army officer, Major General David Chalmers. He has often worn uniform when visiting Aboriginal communities, no doubt in part to emphasise his neutral status politically and more broadly.

A precedent cited for a senior Army officer heading an emergency task force is Major General Alan Stretton's appointment following Darwin's devastation by Cyclone Tracy in 1974. But this was a conventional natural disaster, Stretton was the head of the National Disasters Organisation (NDO), he was only so appointed for a period of weeks while the emergency was at its height, and he handed over to the civil authorities as soon as he could. It is worth noting that the NDO evolved into Emergency Management Australia in 1993, was taken out of the Department of Defence in 2001, and has long been headed by a public servant rather than a military engineer.

Because of the attendant and potential controversy about the federal intervention in Aboriginal communities, and because it encompasses civil policing functions, it would be better if this long-term operation, emergency or not, was now headed by a civilian official (say a senior physician) rather than a military officer. This government has often relied on the professional 'can do' approach of the ADF to overcome bureaucratic and other obstacles, but leaving Major General Chalmers in the position much longer is now inappropriate on a range of constitutional, professional and national-unity grounds. He should be released to return to his core business as a senior ADF officer.●

## Landing ourselves a big future problem

**P**olitical squabbling between the Coalition federal government and various Labor state governments over housing affordability policy in an election year has again led covetous eyes to be wrongly cast on Department of Defence landholdings as a quick political fix. This is an old problem where the long-term operational effectiveness and flexibility of the defence force, and its basing, are wrongly threatened or sacrificed for temporary party-political expediency.

Defence is the largest landholder in the country but much of these lands are necessarily in its rural and regional bases, and its rural training areas and firing and bombing ranges. Barracks and bases in urban areas and on the edge of our major cities also occupy large areas, but not inordinately so when compared to other major public services or major industries.

From time to time, some of Defence's urban land becomes surplus to requirements for legitimate reasons and after careful consideration of the alternatives for maintaining our long-term defence capabilities. But the label 'surplus' is too often bandied around in reference to Defence land by state governments and oppositions feeling the heat for poor infrastructure planning or other short-term economic and land-use policies at state level.

The problem is exacerbated because defence is a wholly federal responsibility and state governments tend to look at defence land only as a commodity and not as an essential means of delivery for a long-term public service. A good test of this is to ask a state politician, of any political complexion, why they are so keen to acquire land owned by Defence but would generally balk at selling all their own railway yards, tram or bus depots and docks.

There are several problems with unthinkingly flogging off Defence land to satisfy short-term party-political goals.

First, wherever possible and for at least part of their often long careers, personnel serving in the defence force should be able to work, and their families reside, in areas with the same standards of community facilities that are accepted as normal by their fellow Australians. Perpetually marooning ADF personnel and their families in areas with limited schooling, limited jobs for spouses, limited local facilities and often a limited range of housing, is not only unfair in itself, it is also not conducive to morale and high personnel retention rates in the long run.

Second, an effective national profile for the defence force must be maintained and proximity to major population centres is a vital part of this. All Australians must have regular and informed contact with their defence force and its members (including when off duty). If not, levels of public understanding of defence matters will further decline, followed inevitably by another period of inadequate national defence investment as government revenues are diverted into even more social spending.

Third, pushing large parts of the ADF away from where most Australians live causes recruiting problems. This occurs directly by losing opportunities to market the ADF through frequent contact, example and neighbourly continuity. It also occurs indirectly because families will be more reluctant to encourage enlistment if too many long periods of separation are involved at least in the early stages.

Fourth, ADF facilities often need buffer zones for training, security, noise control and future expansion. Apparently vacant areas are rarely surplus in terms of operational or long-term use.

Finally, two other historical factors have meant that the ADF has often been short-changed when surrendering land through political pressure. Many are the examples where residential land has been bought cheaply because of its proximity to the noise emanating from ADF firing ranges or airbases, only to be followed by demands the ADF facilities be closed to improve residential amenity (and personal financial gain). Furthermore, when Defence tries to rationalise its genuinely surplus landholdings through sale, there is a tendency for local communities and their politicians at all levels to demand instead that it be donated or sold at a nominal sum so it can be converted to community use. All very well and fine in theory, at least in some cases, but often not much use if the land sales are needed to finance the relocation and replication of defence facilities and their operational capabilities elsewhere. Politicians are invariably less keen to apply the same thinking to the sale of state and local government landholdings.●

## Irony corner

- Australian Democrats leader, Senator Lyn Allison, lamented that "our armed forces [sic] are becoming more and more geared towards warfighting than peacekeeping".●
- The NSW Department of Education has banned state high schools from organising treks on the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea because it is "too risky and creates insurance problems". The ages of many participating students on such treks would match that of the mid-teen militia diggers who fought the Japanese there in 1942.●