



## Defence issues missing in the 2010 election

Both Labor and the Coalition released their defence policies early in the last week of a five-week election campaign. This timing tells us a number of things. That both policies are quite sparse with new initiatives and often detail — and that both parties largely agree about more than they disagree — tells us even more. Particularly when you ignore the rhetoric aimed at partisan differentiation for short-term electoral advantage.

Despite occasional commentariat chatter about supposed “khaki elections”, these are really few and far between with the last significant one being in 1966. An enduring electoral truth in Australia is that few votes change on a defence or even a wider national security issue alone (hence the frequent neglect of defence responsibilities by governments of both political persuasions). It would be safe to say that in this election virtually no votes will be changed because of defence policy differences between the current and alternative governments.

It is, however, worth noting that some voting decisions are likely to change, or harden, because of the willingness or otherwise of parties to finally reform indexation of superannuation payments for retired ADF personnel. But this is a social equity and moral issue, not a defence one per se. Except, of course, for ever-growing resentment at the regular contradiction between declarations by both major parties of the importance of national defence efforts, and of the unique nature of military service, while at the same time allowing ADF superannuation payments to continue losing purchasing power compared to all other pensions through unfair indexation arrangements. This resentment has strengthened because both parties have too long ignored this inequitable treatment of retired ADF personnel, through a ruthless political assessment that the numbers affected are electorally minimal on a national basis.

The strategic backdrop to defence policy debate, or indeed the lack of it, in this election is that the strategic rationale for, and overall structure of, the ADF and its future development have broad bipartisan agreement. The only differences are how to pay for it, and even here the differences are largely more spin than real commitment to hard decisions that cost money (and perhaps votes).

Moreover, despite a change of government in 2007, puff about the relevance and utility of past and future White Papers, and continuing party-political argy-bargy about departmental “waste” and alleged ministerial failings, this bipartisan consensus on rationale and overall force structure remain grounded in commonsense decisions about the need to rebuild the ADF made in the November 2003 Defence Capability Review.

### Highlights:

- Not debating defence in this election campaign
- Don't mention the war!
- Labor: Resting on laurels?
- Coalition: “Where's the meat?” might be the cry
- Why look at the defence policy of minor parties?
- The Greens: Ideology wins out over detail and reality
- Could or should Kevin Rudd be Minister for Defence?

This review followed the strategic shocks of the close-run 1999 East Timor crisis, the New York and Bali terrorist attacks in 2001 and 2002 respectively, the first years in Afghanistan following the UN-endorsed intervention in 2001, the early 2003 intervention in Iraq and the mid-2003 deployment of RAMSI to the Solomons. Modified where necessary, of course, by the ADF's considerable operational experiences over the ensuing seven years — and now by the constraints of the GFC magnified by recurring public indifference to the need for adequate and sustained defence investment.

The effects of a nominally unpopular war in Afghanistan, and the unwillingness to reverse this unpopularity through public discussion led by either side of politics, also play a part in dampening informed public debate. ●

## Don't mention the war

While both Labor and the Coalition declare the intention to continue Australia's commitment to the UN-endorsed International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, there are some apparent differences in perceptions, practice and probably strength of will.

The Coalition appears to still support ISAF's UN-endorsed mission of securing representative democratic government in Afghanistan and preventing the return of Taliban-sponsored sanctuaries for Islamist terrorists. Labor's position has become more nuanced, with statements over the last two years being phrased as continuing the commitment only until the Afghan security forces can take over responsibility for Oruzgan Province.

Despite much strategic and professional advice to the contrary, Labor also long resisted the concept of taking over responsibility from the departing Dutch as the senior ISAF partner in Oruzgan. The Coalition has indicated they are perhaps open to the option, depending on the dynamic situation on the ground and the professional military advice received. As the Dutch have now left and been replaced by the US, this point may now be a moot one.

Due to the perceived unpopularity of the Afghanistan commitment — an unpopularity often largely based on insufficient or simplistic understandings, ideology or emotion rather than informed objectivity — both main parties see no benefit in raising the Afghanistan War as an election issue.

In broad terms, an Australian electorate largely disengaged from defence and strategic issues does not seem to care much either. Those who do strongly oppose the Afghanistan commitment may be more likely to vote Green anyway because of wider ideological affiliations. ●

## Labor: Steady as she goes even as HMAS Defence-rebuild starts taking fiscal water

Labor is essentially standing on its record in defence matters since 2007. It is able to do this because Labor defence policy is built on reasonably current foundations. These include a recent White Paper (mid 2009), revised defence industry policy (2010), and bipartisan agreement on most of the strategy and force structure fundamentals. Coupled with the generally acknowledged ministerial competence of Senator John Faulkner (his staff) and his junior ministers, and further bipartisan agreement about the war in Afghanistan (at least on

the surface), Labor has little new to add in terms of new policy for the election.

Despite the long-term investment plan out to 2017/18, and then at lower levels to 2030, promulgated in the 2009 Defence White Paper, the big weakness in the Labor position is faltering political will concerning adequate and sustained defence investment. This is best demonstrated in the deferrals of the last two federal budgets, and in the over-reliance on meeting capability development targets by harvesting internal savings within Defence's existing finances, structures and processes. Nearly all the new or renewed initiatives below, for example, would be paid for by cannibalising existing investment rather than supplementing it with new funding.

Labor's 30-page *Plan for Defence* is therefore an elegant discussion of past performance (first 10 pages), repetition of past decisions about the future (second 10 pages), a mixture of the two interspersed with the odd new initiative (next 7 pages), and a final two and a half pages criticising the record of the last Coalition government.

The new or adapted proposals include:

- better treatment and rehabilitation for personnel suffering wounds, injuries and illnesses stemming from active service (as part of a \$21.2m program over four years named after Gallipoli's John Simpson Kirkpatrick);
- further strategic alliances between Defence medical services and state-based civil hospitals;
- a promise to "make sure Defence receives adequate funding to provide every reservist with sufficient training days to meet their training requirement" (a promise that will be met with considerable scepticism by most reservists); and
- an independent commission to consider Department of Defence recommendations for base rationalisation, and to conduct "substantial public consultations before reporting back to government".

To an extent, Labor has not had to pledge new initiatives because it is happy to stand on its record since taking office in 2007. •

## Coalition: Bits & pieces strung together?

Somewhat surprisingly in some ways, but not in others (because both main parties essentially agree on much of the basics), the Coalition has also offered only a few new defence policy proposals. These include:

- a green paper on revitalising the ADF's reserve components;
- procurement in 2015-16 of three *Global Hawk* remotely-piloted aircraft for maritime surveillance;
- restoring the ADF Gap-Year program to 1000 places from 2011-12;
- making the Defence Materiel Organisation (DMO) a prescribed agency (which they could probably be convinced otherwise in government because the disadvantages outweigh the advantages);
- establishing a defence industry advocate to assist Australian defence industry to deal with the DMO;
- from 01 July 2011, fixing the indexation of DRFB and DFRDB superannuation payments from age 55 (so they finally match the indexation of social security pensions);
- free basic health and dental care (undefined) to all ADF members (who already have it as a condition of service) and their dependents in close proximity (undefined) to Defence establishments across the country; and
- institution of a Governor-General's Cross award for the next-of-kin of ADF personnel killed in action, or died of wounds or illness, on or resulting from operations since 1948.

The Coalition also appear to have a touching faith in the value of the Pappas Report and other budget audits by business figures without defence force experience. This thinking led to the failed Defence Efficiency Review in 1997, a text-book example of how commercial business processes cannot solve every defence capability and project management problem, and indeed can make them much worse if implemented ideologically.

Finally, Coalition policy on a replacement for the Australian Military Court is also centred on vesting this in the Federal Court, and is only slightly less inchoate than Labor intentions on this important matter. As with Labor, the Coalition seems to be fixated on civil legal viewpoints, including the needless abolition of courts martial. Both parties are ignoring appropriate consideration of the operational capability implications of a purely civil court solution — and ignoring the right of ADF personnel to fair trials by their peers in courts with a sufficient understanding of military contexts and nuanced and difficult wartime or other foreign situations. •

## Why scrutinise the minor parties?

The decision by the ADA during the 2007 election campaign to not comment in detail about the defence and national security policies of the Greens and the Australian Democrats subsequently generated some heated debate in our journal *Defender*. The Association's decision was based on the fact that the two minor parties both had only very general policies, that these essentially showed little or no consideration of the likely difficulties in actually implementing them in government, that neither party (or indeed Australia) was likely to face such implementation problems, and that this situation encouraged not discouraged poor public policy development. The Association's conclusion in 2007 was that our not unlimited analytical effort was better invested in the public interest by concentrating on the policies put forward by the governing and alternative-government parties.

Critics of not covering the policies of the minor parties pointed out the immediate and long-term importance of highlighting the policies offered by the minor parties. Especially when these included or seemed to include numerous contradictions, superficialities and unrealistic ideas, often flavoured by naïveté, impracticality or worse. The reasons offered for analysing the minor-party policies in more detail at the next (now current) election covered a wide range. Some expressed concern at the effects of the unleavened ideological fervour of the Greens in particular. Others were concerned at the likelihood that minor parties might hold the balance of power in the Senate and detrimentally influence legislation at the expense of majority viewpoints and hard-won military reforms and strategic lessons. Many contributors to the debate also offered the practical observation that minor parties, no matter how ideologically extreme or not, would not be able to improve or focus their defence and wider national security policies if they were never objectively criticised by specialised, independent, non-partisan watchdogs such as the ADA. •

## The Greens: just spraying bullet points

The Greens have their organisational and institutional culture roots in various protest movements, not the political mainstream, and henceforth do many things differently to the more established parties. They do not appear, for example, to have an official treasury or defence spokesperson, although concerning the latter, since election in 2007 Senator Scott Ludlam has introduced a degree of credibility at Senate estimates committee hearings never before witnessed among the Greens.

The Greens' published policies on most matters are limited in detail, mainly comprising only lists of principles and goals, followed by a list of measures intended to implement them. The measures are mostly devoid of detail or context, are often phrased as absolutes, and the principles, goals and measures in different policies sometimes contradict each other.

After examining the Greens' published policies for what they categorise as peace and security, international relations, global governance, overseas aid, human rights, justice, immigration and refugees, and multiculturalism, some broad conclusions can be drawn. First, the body of policy often lacks coherence and consistency, even from the overall ideological viewpoint of the Greens. Second, terminology errors, archaic phrasing and misunderstandings about the structure of government agencies abound. Third, the lack of context or discussion means the lists are often just fact-free bullet points not public policy. Fourth, many proposed policies, prohibitions and strictures already apply but the policy formulators appear unaware of this. Finally, the apparent or clear lack of research behind some proposals, and the banal motherhood statements of others, undermine their utility, credibility or objectivity as a basis for informed public debate.

Including some obvious and apparent contradictions and inconsistencies, key defence and wider national security measures proposed by the Greens include:

- a reduction in Australian and global "military expenditure";
- a constitutional amendment requiring federal parliamentary endorsement of ADF deployments (undefined) overseas;
- repeal of Australia's sedition laws (the position on treason and treachery laws is not stated);
- immediate withdrawal of forces from Iraq and Afghanistan;
- deployment of the ADF only for defence (undefined) and peace-keeping and not for "offensive action" (undefined);
- abrogating the ANZUS treaty (in effect) and ending participation in US missile defence programs;
- no nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered forces to be deployed within "Australia's maritime boundaries" (undefined)
- closure of joint facilities in Australia operated with the US and Singapore (described and proscribed as "foreign bases");
- no training or other deployments by foreign forces in Australia;
- no training by the ADF with "armed forces known to have committed human rights abuses";
- "ensure that decisions on defence procurement are based on Australia's [unstated] defence needs";
- "ensure that defence procurements do not restrict the operations of the ADF by increased reliance on any one country";
- no "arms trade fairs" in Australia or sales of Australian weaponry or components overseas;
- no military conscription (no context stated);
- development of a Coastguard to replace ADF elements in "coastal policing";
- support the convening of a UN-sponsored international peace conference on nuclear non-proliferation and general nuclear disarmament;
- "work towards a nuclear-free Asia-Pacific region" and "the Regional Non-Aggression Pact" (whatever the latter is);
- use of the ADF in overseas disaster relief not to include situations of armed conflict (where only civilians should be used); and
- "ensure Australia acts decisively within UN-supported operations to prevent acts of genocide and crimes against humanity and to bring perpetrators to trial in the International Criminal Court". •

The bottom line about Greens defence and national security policies is that few Greens voters seem to be much motivated by concern that Australia is adequately defended. Greens policies naturally reflect this. They also reflect an approach that is largely doctrinaire rather than objective — or even comprehensive or coherent within the guidelines of their doctrinal approach. As the Greens adapt to increased parliamentary influence and electoral strength they will need to devote greater effort to defence policy development and its consistency and coherence. •

## Can or should Kevin Rudd be Minister for Defence?

Prime Minister Julia Gillard has declared on a number of occasions that, should Labor win the election, Kevin Rudd will return to the ministry in a senior Cabinet position. Most commentary has assumed this would be as Minister for Foreign Affairs, following the post-leadership precedents of Labor's Bill Hayden (1983-1988) and the Liberal's Alexander Downer (1996-2007).

The idea that the frustrations, or worse, of retaining a deposed party leader in the Cabinet is best managed in the foreign affairs portfolio is well entrenched. The portfolio involves a fair degree of foreign travel and therefore absences from Australia. It also offers opportunities for deposed leaders to rebuild their confidence and forge latter-parliamentary careers in a wider and perhaps less petty arena than domestic politics.

Despite his pre-politics experience as a junior diplomat, the prospect of Kevin Rudd as Minister for Foreign Affairs has not necessarily excited staff of that department. Rudd at DFAT has, however, received more support throughout the Department of Defence, following other speculation that he might instead be Minister for Defence following the retirement of John Faulkner.

The only precedent for a deposed prime minister staying in Cabinet as Minister for Defence was John Gorton for five months (mid-March to mid-August 1971), following his comparatively turbulent prime-ministership 1968-71. A decorated fighter pilot in World War II, Gorton had previously had much success as Minister for the Navy (1958-63), where he is widely regarded by historians and retired naval officers as the best minister ever in that portfolio.

The experiment of a deposed prime minister as Minister for Defence was not a success for a range of personality, power balance, public perception and political reasons. And this lack of success occurred despite Gorton's experience as a junior minister in the Defence portfolio, the credibility he had from his personal active service experience, and the respect he largely enjoyed from all ranks of the defence force for his informality and genuine interest in his portfolio responsibilities — sharpened by the stark contrast in all regards to his predecessor, Malcolm Fraser, who was regarded as ambitious, capricious, self-centred and arrogant.

Gorton's successor as prime minister, William McMahon, ended up sacking him only a few months later because of the party instability caused by retaining Gorton in Cabinet in such a key portfolio. The fact that the ADF was still deployed operationally in the latter stages of the Vietnam War also played a part, as the party squabbles were an unnecessary distraction from appropriate attention to national strategic priorities.

The allocation of ministerial portfolios is, of course, the prerogative of the prime minister. The lessons of history, however, would indicate that former prime ministers who are retained in Cabinet after being deposed by their party are not suited to the Defence portfolio, especially when the ADF is fighting yet another unpopular war.

In the case of Kevin Rudd, the question must also be asked whether he has the personality and ability to delegate so necessary for success in the Defence portfolio. •



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