

Another wasted election opportunity

The fundamental problem in planning and managing Australia's defence is a continual clash of perspectives between our three-year federal electoral cycle and the 15 to 25 year investment cycle required to structure, equip and sustain a professional defence force.

The intellectual horizon of most Australian politicians is focused on winning the next election and maximising short-term party political advantage in office or out. Actual governance, especially concerning long-term responsibilities such as defence, is sorely neglected.

Few Australians change their vote on a defence issue alone and, in general, the electorate blindly trusts governments to be properly responsible for national security. This lack of votes in defence is disastrous in a political culture so obsessed with party politics and winning elections at all costs.

No party is really prepared to commit to the amount and continuity of defence funding required. Defence spending continues to decline relative to general expenditure and economic growth. It is declining steeply compared to the ever-burgeoning funds increasingly diverted to vote-buying areas such as social security, health and education.

Many Australians do not think much about defence until a crisis jolts them from their 'land of the long weekend' complacency and the government of the day is forced into crisis management mode. The electorate needs to hold governments accountable for the lamentable lack of diplomatic or military options rediscovered by each crisis.

One day our luck will run out and with little warning. Reliance on 'defence on the cheap', muddling through, ADF professionalism, and the financial and strategic subsidies of the US alliance, will not be enough to stave off strategic humiliation or worse.

In this election the Australian people are again offered similarly inadequate defence policies from the Coalition and Labor. Despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, both intend to continue their sustained under-investment. While they posture about supposed differences in strategic policy, the two main parties differ little on fundamental defence issues. Their continued deceptions regarding their inability to make proper provision for defence constitute a gross failure of national leadership.

At least with the current government the National Security Committee of Cabinet has functioned at its best for a generation. Sadly, this is indeed faint praise as, overall, the decades of worsening defence neglect have been only slowed somewhat temporarily and certainly not reversed. If Labor wins, we will have a prime minister who has so far demonstrated little understanding and, more worryingly, little interest in complex strategic issues. He would be heavily dependent on his experienced defence minister and energetic foreign minister—and the teamwork required would itself be a formidable challenge.

That the majority of our politicians see no need to

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Our cover

An M113 APC boards HMAS *Tobruk* during a recent amphibious exercise.

Photo courtesy DoD

genuinely interest themselves in defence matters is increasingly dangerous. Their ostentatious appearances at defence force farewell and welcome home parades do not replace real understanding and commitment.

Our defence force members and their families bear the brunt of this neglect on a day-to-day basis through high operational tempos, old or inadequate numbers of equipment, low personnel numbers and conditions of service lagging behind community norms. The desire of our leaders for 'defence on the cheap' makes it especially wrong to expect ADF members to put their lives on the line on our behalf.

We should instead back them with real leadership, adequate funding and national honesty. ♦