

defender

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A state of denial:

A sad legacy for future generations

Peter Criss

The imminent acquisition of a replacement fighter and strike aircraft comes at a time when many changes in global politics are occurring and when attempted reforms within our Defence organisation have been deliberately circumvented.

Several developments triggered this article: one in the recent past and two currently. The first influence comes from the deliberate circumvention of a damning Senate report into military justice and the latter two triggers are the nuclear test by North Korea, and the RAAF declaring they “won’t need [an] interim jet”, and announcing that the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) will be purchased.

A broad canvas of issues some may say; however, they are interlinked, which is perturbing. They involve:

- Australia’s small national defence force struggling to sustain itself through conventional recruiting and retention techniques;
- the degrading North-Asian strategic environment with its potential to destabilise the wider region and promote an arms race;
- already prolific numbers of late-generation Russian fighter aircraft in the near and wider regions; and
- a declared decision to purchase the JSF regardless of risk.

Whilst Australia can do little to shape or indeed even influence the external strategic situation, our leaders can address internal failings. Worryingly, there is another very strong influence which is shaping issues across Defence. This is a cultural force; characterised best as Defence’s internal ‘culture of denial’. Such a culture was graphically revealed in the recent Senate Inquiry’s descriptions of different military justice cases where behavioural patterns of opaqueness, self-preservation, and arbitrary decision-making processes abounded. This ‘culture of denial’ pervades all key areas of Defence; from military justice, to recruitment, management, capability development and acquisition.

Until now I have been an impartial and silent observer of Defence Department decision makers, be they civilian or military, as they work with Government in trying to provide the best possible level of military capability. My focus is now

firmly on what legacy we are leaving our future generations. I have significant concerns.

Military justice

The Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, in handing down its June 2005 report, *The effectiveness of Australia’s military justice system*, presented the Government with the opportunity to make military justice conform with contemporary Australian community standards. The Government could have demanded that the ADF embrace a military justice system that would deliver impartial, independent and transparent discipline and administrative justice decisions for all ranks without fear or favour. The opportunity was squandered. A fair go for all, the most basic attribute of Australian society, continues to be denied to those in uniform.

Instead, the men and women of the ADF are now subjected to an internal propaganda barrage assuring them that genuine reform is flowing from the Senate report. That same indoctrination does not explain why the ADF leadership team urged the Government not to accept critical aspects of the same report. In CDF’s submission to the Senate he said: ‘The ADF has a military justice system to support commanders and to ensure effective command at all times.’ In my view, that assertion by CDF should have been made subservient to impartiality and transparency rather than the preservation of a completely in-house and collusive system of justice. Regrettably, the Government allowed the CDF’s views to prevail.

While those Senate committee recommendations that were supported by the ADF’s leadership and subsequently adopted by Government will incrementally improve military justice, when compared to the recommendations they rejected, the approved changes represent mere window dressing. The military justice system has failed to develop any avenue of independent redress for the individual. We still have a closed system whose fairness, efficiency and transparency is completely dependent on the integrity of ADF leaders, at all levels.

Impartiality and transparency in military justice decisions remain wanting despite protestations by Government and the Department to the contrary. Outcomes can be, and are being, manipulated and there is no avenue for a truly independent appeal – the Defence Force Ombudsman will not investigate a matter if the Department already claims to have investigated

it, and yet all Defence investigators ultimately work under command of the Chief of Defence Force.

How can we expect young Australians to join an organisation where a commander's prerogative can deny personnel their most fundamental human right – access to an impartial and transparent hearing and a truly independent appeal process?

New combat aircraft

The acquisition of Australia's new strike/fighter, both as a strategic element of military hardware, and as a process of decision making, bears all the hallmarks of the same collusive and self-referential decision-making environment evident with military justice.

A recent article by AAP defence correspondent, Max Blenkin, is cause for alarm. He quotes the Deputy Chief of the Air Force stating that the ADF will buy the JSF and that there is unlikely to be a need for an interim solution. The latter statement I take no issue with. An interim purchase or lease of strike aircraft, when we already own and have spares to support our existing strike aircraft, the F-111, for another decade would make even less sense than the current decision to withdraw that aircraft by 2010.

In his evidence to a Parliamentary committee recently, the Chief of Air Force stated that he was concerned about 'not knowing what it is that he does not know'. Now I am concerned. Apparently, because CAF says they 'don't know what they don't know about the F-111', this is sufficient justification to get rid of it prematurely. Yet the Aerospace Adviser to the Minister recently acknowledged that a fully combat-capable JSF will not be available until around 2018. Even before the recent North Korean action, the F-111 decision was questionable. It makes even less sense now.

Good risk management is all about knowing what you know and finding out about those things you don't know, then putting in place risk-mitigation strategies that ensure the risks do not materialise. The F-111 operates under this strategy in the only true Ageing-Aircraft Program in the ADF.

The germane question is 'can we support the system at acceptable cost and risk?' DSTO and Industry can definitively answer that question provided those who know are allowed to provide frank and honest advice without fear of recrimination or retribution.

Why did we spend hundreds of millions of dollars procuring life-of-type spares, only to now discard them? Why did we spend millions of dollars recently installing a specialised test facility that guarantees airframe integrity, only to now scrap it? Why did we go to all the cost and effort of moving the aircraft's deeper level maintenance to civilian contractors to now walk away when they are delivering levels of aircraft availability not seen for many years?

For those who claim the F/A-18 can temporarily fulfil both roles into this uncertain future, I simply say, think again! The F/A-18 fleet cannot currently meet its peacetime fighter availability requirements and further costly structural and enhancement programs will diminish this availability even further.

How is it that we can apparently commit to a JSF purchase when the acquisition risk management procedures for guaranteeing the integrity of the decision were arbitrarily deleted by departmental senior management in 2002?

Moreover, the Minister's aerospace advisor recently confirmed that no request for price or availability of the F-22 Raptor has been solicited from the United States. Yet the F-22, in open literature, is credited with superior performance to the JSF in all respects at near to, or even at, price parity. The F-22 is even openly acknowledged by the JSF manufacturer to be superior and it is already in operational service delivering unsurpassed levels of fighter and strike capability.

Our acquisition bureaucracy is ignoring its own procedures and appears to be supporting an arbitrary decision to pursue the JSF regardless of cost, schedule and performance. One is forced to ask what is driving this agenda? Why spend billions upgrading the worn out F/A-18 as a stop-gap measure when a replacement exists now that appears superior.

Whether the JSF is actually cheaper than the F-22 is irrelevant, since the JSF is not capable of doing the job in near and wider regions awash with advanced Russian fighters. The fundamental point must be that no matter how many JSFs are procured, if the aircraft cannot guarantee control of the regional battlespace, then what utility does it have for the ADF?

Defence's decision-making process

The executive decisions that went into rejecting the key elements of the Senate's military justice report, and the apparent adoption of the JSF aircraft, are part of a broader disposition the ADF leadership is adopting to decision-making and general corporate management. The culture of denial involved represents cause for considerable concern. With the justice report I support the Reference Committee's claim that it constructed a justice system that would have delivered impartial, rigorous, transparent and fair outcomes. That is not what the troops received. As for the JSF decision, one can only hope that a return to the formal acquisition process will still happen, where all credible options can be evaluated in a rigorous, analytical, impartial and transparent manner.

At present I am observing a Defence organisation that has illusions of invulnerability, one that is suffering from collective rationalisation, a self-determined morality that quickly reverts to denial if challenged, and where serving members are subjected to an over-imposed requirement for conformity. In this context 'self-censorship is prevalent, leading to a false appearance of unanimity, all being supervised by mindguards.' These are not my words, Professor Janis (1973) warned of such systemic organisational failings 33 years ago – it is termed 'groupthink'.

For the sake of our future generations, these behavioural traits must be excised. ♦

Air Vice-Marshal Peter Criss, AM, AFC, (Retd) joined the RAAF in 1968 and flew over 5000 hours in Sabre, Mirage and F-111 aircraft. At the tactical level he was both a squadron and wing commander. At the operational level he was Air Commander Australia in 1999 and early 2000 during the successful East Timor operation. Before involuntary redundancy in late 2001 he headed a study for CDF into the management of preparedness in the ADF.