

manage in an orderly fashion the continuous and rolling need to adequately modernise and re-equip the ADF.

This budget's small increase in defence spending (around \$570 million at most depending on how you convert the figures) reflects only the limited three per cent real growth per annum promised in the 2000 Defence White Paper anyway. Our strategic circumstances have changed greatly since this White Paper was published three years ago and much greater defence spending is now even more essential. One illustration of the problem is that this year's defence allocation is actually \$41 million less than the last budget's forecast allocation for this year (\$13,970 m compared with the last budget's projection of \$14,011 m for 2003–04).

With defence spending down to well under two per cent of GDP (1.8 per cent by some calculations) we are not even treading water that well. The gap between White Paper assessments of what is needed and actual spending since 1987 is now over \$100 billion. Defence spending needs to be at least 2.3 per cent of GDP in order to catch up for decades of relative neglect. It needs to be even greater to pay for the modern, versatile, operationally ready and sustainable defence force we actually need.

However, the Association notes that before defence spending is increased to the level really needed, major organisational and corporate governance reforms are required in the Department of Defence. These are essential to ensure the money is used wisely, and that our defence strategy and ADF capability development processes are sufficiently robust.

Finally, ADA members and *Defender* readers are likely to meet fellow Australians who may mistakenly believe that defence spending is somehow too high or that Australia cannot afford to spend more. We all need to take every opportunity to explain instead the stark truth. One of the best ways of doing so is to present the uninformed with the stark comparisons. Defence spending is now only the fourth largest national outlay (it was actually fifth for a while until government debt was reduced). Australia spends at least 5 to 6 times as much on welfare, at least 3 to 4 times as much on health, and at least 2 to 3 times as much on education, as we do on defence. Even without acknowledging our current and foreseeable difficult strategic circumstances, this low spending on defence should concern all Australians.

The Commonwealth alone spends five times as much on social welfare as it spends on defence. Federal spending on health alone is now over twice that spent on defence even before the significant spending by the States (on what is primarily a State responsibility) is included. Federal spending alone on education (also primarily a State responsibility and about half of each State budget) is virtually the same as that spent on defence. The defence budget seems relatively high to some because they fail to realise that it is met solely by federal spending.

Whatever your views on the importance of social welfare, health and education spending we need to face up to our neglect regarding an issue at least as important — our national defence.

The darkening ecliptic

The apparently post-Modernist approach to public affairs continues in the Department of Defence's intriguingly titled Public Affairs and Corporate Communications (PACC) Division. Ern Malley would have been proud of them.

Over the last three years the number of queries to the ADA from the media has increased exponentially. As a rough rule-of-thumb about a half to two-thirds of these queries have primarily involved journalists seeking simple facts, basic explanations or historical background on various aspects of the ADF.

Prior to the advent of the highly bureaucratised, centralised and 'politically focused' PACC, such uncontroversial, security-neutral and/or basic queries were invariably handled, very promptly and efficiently, by uniformed ADF members working in the Directorates of Public Information answerable to the CDF and the three Service Chiefs.

The media appear to now often contact the ADA instead and increasingly regard the Association as a de facto Defence public-affairs body. On receiving such basic queries, journalists contacting the ADA are usually asked 'have they sought the information required from Defence'. Almost invariably the response falls into one or more of six categories:

- civilian PACC staff do not know the answer and/or how to find it out;
- the time that PACC staff have advised will be necessary to furnish an answer is either unknown or clearly exceeds filing deadlines for the story;
- PACC staff have simply not rung back;
- the answer provided by PACC staff has been irrelevant, incomplete or contradictory to other research of open sources;
- the journalist was referred to the ADA by Defence public-relations staff; or
- the journalist no longer believes it is worth the effort to seek the information from PACC in the first place.

Now the standard of question asked by many generalist journalists allocated a defence storyline to follow up is often very badly thought through. Questions from such defence neophytes frequently show only the most cursory understanding of defence issues, international affairs, Australian history and Australian governance. This is all the more reason, however, to staff Defence public affairs with experienced ADF officers and senior NCO/sailors from operational backgrounds like we used to do fairly well. Journalists need to talk directly to 'operators' in order to get timely and real answers to their questions.

However, for argument's sake, let us allow for the strictly controlled information flow theory inherent in the centralised bureaucratic model instituted through PACC. Let us also ignore for a moment the apparent preference to employ civilian staff with little understanding or knowledge of the ADF. Even ignoring these two aspects,

it still seems silly at best that media queries with no political sensitivity or security connotation cannot be handled efficiently and quickly. This approach also seems purpose-designed to exacerbate negative perceptions and stories rather than kill them during their gestation with the facts and/or an appropriate commonsense ADF perspective.

Some recent examples of other journalistic frustration with PACC include:

- A broadsheet journalist having to wait 28 hours when posing the simple query — what are the three largest ADF bases in Australia in terms of people stationed there?
- A broadsheet journalist wanting to write a ‘good news’ story on one Service’s recruiting activities in a certain State was continually fobbed off for some weeks from contact with the recruiting staff concerned.
- A television journalist seeking to interview ADF personnel, as to their professional judgement concerning the (non-controversial) mooted replacement for a certain weapon system, being refused all access to the units and individuals concerned.

Now we should not ignore that some parts of PACC work well. But the unprofessional chaos in ‘front office’ public affairs, and the flawed management philosophy and practices underlying PACC itself, are essentially caused by Defence ignoring three fundamental principles of military operations.

First, ADF public affairs is first and foremost a function of command, at all levels, and ADF commanders should be trusted to run their own public affairs. If they cannot be so trusted they should not be commanders at any level. If the commander’s staff do not know which public-affairs issues are sensitive and might require referral upwards to the minister, or horizontally to the department, they should not be ADF officers.

Second, in modern war, even more so than in the past, information is an essential tool of warfighting. It is an operational function and responsibility at all levels, not an administrative or bureaucratic one.

Third, the ADF fights as it trains and operates in peacetime. If ADF commanders and their staffs cannot handle their own public affairs in peacetime as they move up through the ranks, where do they gain the expertise to do so when deployed on operations with far greater public-affairs pressures and responsibilities?

The current structure and practice of Defence public affairs is riddled with serious moral, professional and practical contradictions. Many of Australia’s most experienced journalists invariably describe PACC as a nightmare or worse. Even excluding the lessons of the so-called ‘children overboard’ debacle still ringing in our ears, a fundamental commonsense rethink is urgently required. It is the ADA’s firm belief that the dubiously titled PACC would and should not survive such a review.

In the meantime, given the high workload for the ADA due to PACC’s apparent inability to do the job, the Association is now considering invoicing the

Department of Defence for its onerous public-affairs services on the ADF’s behalf.

Rooting out terrorists from the verbiage

The ongoing trials in Indonesia of the Bali bombers should bring many of our national security debates in Australia down to earth but we would not bet on it. Several of the terrorists have declared in open court they hate us because we are ‘white’ and ‘Western’ and believe our deaths do not matter because of this. The ideological material discovered by the Indonesian Police investigating the bombing is generally just as intellectually shallow, and is riddled with religious bigotry, racism, misogyny, homophobia and extremely puritanical views on socialising, alcohol consumption and sex. Put simply, they fear and loathe Western liberal democracy and its pluralism and tolerance.

If the terrorists understood our systems and beliefs well enough they might smile more often, especially when our way of doing things unnecessarily delays essential action to thwart their attacks. Given the yawning tolerance and accountability gap between them and us, the question of which terrorist groups should be proscribed in Australia, and what degree of counter-terrorist measures might be temporarily necessary, are essentially simple ones.

There are natural concerns about allowing the Government to just add terrorist groups to the proscribed list but some appropriate safeguard mechanism is surely not beyond the realms of reason. This is especially so as terrorist groups mutate and change their names with some frequency. A parliamentary vote being required each time such a mutation occurs seems clumsy and time consuming at best. Furthermore, given the record and views of some fringe parties in the Senate, it is also reasonable to harbour concerns about commonsense always being applied if a parliamentary vote is always necessary. Basing our list on UN processes is also not an option. The UN invariably fails to act quickly, or agree on the obvious, such as Hezbollah being a terrorist organisation.

Similar circumstances beset consideration of the new ASIO Bill becalmed in the Senate for the last six months. A major stopping point is the proposed, and strictly limited, provision to detain terrorist suspects for questioning for up to seven days. Other concerns centre on the proposal to limit access to lawyers in some circumstances during an urgent ongoing investigation, and the safeguards when detaining legal minors for questioning. Without denying Australia’s proud liberal democratic traditions, none of these provisions appear unreasonable in the current circumstances. The fact we are debating them at such length proves the strength of our system and why abuses of authority are unlikely. Such provisions are also similar to the draconian national security regulations that applied temporarily during both World Wars and these, on the whole, worked very well with minimal abuses occurring.