

The changing of the guard

Patrick Gallagher



Many ADA members and supporters have expressed natural curiosity about Mike O'Connor's successor as Executive Director of the Association — Neil James. Some of us already know him well so I was asked to trace a quick pen picture. Neil certainly seems to appreciate the size of the shoes he is now attempting to fill in following on from such a well-known public figure as Mike.

'I have a very similar challenge to that faced by Peter McDonald when he succeeded Eric Risstrom at the Australian Taxpayers Association (now Taxpayers Australia) in the mid 1990s. Taxpayers Australia is a body that is very like the ADA in many ways, especially in being a community-based, apolitical, nationally-focused interest group providing independent and informed comment in an area of considerable public importance.

Eric had been in the TA chair for several decades, even longer than Mike at the ADA, and was widely respected in economic and fiscal debates. Mike's similar long service as the public face and voice of the ADA made him very well respected in the national security arena. Such men are not easy to replace but everyone is eventually succeeded if not always actually replaced.

Interestingly, both of them foresaw the need for generational change as part of the reinvigoration both public debates required. I can only hope that I am eventually somewhere near as successful with the ADA as Peter has been at Taxpayers Australia.'

As to his motivation for leaving the ADF after

three decades, Neil commented that 'all good things must come to an end' and that he came from a family tradition of active participation in community organisations.

'My Dad has been very actively involved all his life in a wide range of charity, sporting, church, business, professional and general community bodies. As a World War II veteran, he was, until recently, also secretary of the Victorian branch of his regimental association since the war. My late mother was a tireless Church and charity worker. Both my brothers were or are extensively involved in various professional and community organisations at state and national level.

Dad has always emphasised to us a simple rule about community service. When asked to do something, don't ask yourself why should you do it but is there any good reason why you shouldn't? I'm certainly not doing it for the money.'

Neil has been an ADA member for some years. He was attracted to the Association because it alone seemed to be trying to take a holistic approach to lobbying for more attention to Australia's defence.

'My time in New Zealand really brought home to me the vital role the ADA plays. The NZDF, and the Kiwis generally, greatly suffer because there is no New Zealand equivalent to effectively keep the politicians and government machinery honest on defence issues.

In Australia, the RUSI does good work but rarely attracts support outside the ADF, ADF retirees and

those few academics with a real interest in national security. The RSL quite naturally is heavily focused on the needs of veterans although it does have broader interests. The Defence Reserves Association quite rightly looks primarily to the interests of defence reservists. The Navy League and the RAAF Association do good work but naturally concentrate on one Service. The Army, to its long-term detriment, has no national lobby but a myriad of tribally focused Corps and regimental associations. Only the ADA takes a modern, joint-Service approach to defence as a whole and is independent of sectional biases.

Even more importantly, only the ADA is broadly anchored in the Australian community at large. As a long-time swinging voter, and confirmed sceptic on any government's record in managing defence well, I was also attracted to the ADA because of its determined apolitical approach and structures. I was even more impressed when I learnt how the ADA did not depend on donations from defence contractors and saw this as the price of its objectivity and independence.'

Neil joined the Army in 1973 and graduated from Duntroon in 1976. He later obtained a Masters degree from ADFA. After regimental service with 1RAR as a platoon commander in Townsville and Malaysia he began over two decades of Intelligence Corps and non-Corps postings around Australia and overseas. He served in West Germany with the British Army, in Kashmir with UNMOGIP and as the first Australian instructor at the Canadian Forces Intelligence School (where he met his Irish wife, Anne).

In the mid 1980s Neil commanded the military intelligence and security staff at Victoria Barracks in Melbourne, a period that included the bombings of Russell Street Police Headquarters and the Turkish Consulate, and the Hoddle and Queen Street mass murders — the first three having significant ADF involvement in the investigations. Neil graduated from Command and Staff College in 1988 and returned to teach there in 1992–93. Over the last decade he was the foundation head of the Joint Intelligence Branch at Headquarters Northern Command in Darwin (where I followed him), served with UNSCOM in Iraq, and was the foundation director of the Army's 'think-tank', the Land Warfare Studies Centre at Duntroon.

He has authored several Army and ADF doctrine manuals but is probably most known for his comprehensive and controversial (in some quarters) Working Paper on higher defence management reform. Entitled *Real Reform of the Defence Management Paradigm: A Fresh View*, it was published in May 2000 by the Australian Defence Studies Centre at ADFA. The paper continues to attract wide support across the ADF and in defence

industry, and encouraging levels of support among progressive thinkers in the Department of Defence. It argues for root and branch reform of departmental bureaucracy to increase accountability and strengthen ministerial oversight. The paper was also partly responsible for Neil's posting to New Zealand. Some saw this as the exile of a critic, but it was more to protect him from the wrath of several senior figures in the Department of Defence who were somewhat uncomfortable with his informed and trenchant style of criticism.

From his trans-Tasman 'exile', in mid 2001 Neil also submitted an article to the Australian Defence Force Journal deftly criticising the Department of Defence's increasingly unworkable public affairs structure and procedures. The article was not published for reasons that have never been explained, especially by the departmental public affairs staff who can now veto what goes in the previously independent journal. A copy of the article was, however, leaked to the Australian Financial Review by someone at Russell Offices. Neil had absolutely nothing to do with the leak but copped a rocket from the CDF nevertheless — an injustice that still smarts. The article accurately predicted a disaster would happen if policies were not changed, and indeed the failure to reform Defence public affairs was a major contributing factor to the subsequent 'children overboard' fiasco.

Similarly, in late 2001 a very interesting essay Neil wrote on the 11 September terrorist attacks was approved by the Chief of Army for publication in the ADF Journal or *Defender*. This too was vetoed by departmental public affairs staff with no reason ever being provided.

His final ADF posting, in 2001–2002, was as the senior ADF officer on exchange with the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF). After leading the organisational design team within the NZDF's new joint headquarters project, Neil stayed on with the newly formed headquarters at Trentham, just outside Wellington. At the completion of his exchange he handed over as head of the joint plans branch (J5) to a Kiwi colonel who had been one of his students at Command and Staff College a decade earlier. This he says 'provided a fitting professional touch to the end of a posting and a career'.

Neil's time in New Zealand brought home several important lessons concerning the importance of informed public debate regarding national security issues, and especially of the importance of respected bipartisan community watchdogs.

'The defence debate in New Zealand is nowhere near as healthy as it is in Australia. Much of this is due to the smaller size of New Zealand's population. But there are other, often more subtle constraints, that do not apply at all or to the same degree in Australia.

The New Zealand political spectrum is markedly to the left of Australia and most OECD countries. Many New Zealanders also have, however unconsciously, quite isolationist views of the world. Furthermore, just like Ireland and Canada, many Kiwis think they can ignore defence as their big neighbour will worry about this for them. All these factors a mixed together in a relatively small political system heavily influenced by dominant personalities, a single-chamber legislature elected by a form of proportional representation, and comparatively large welfare and other single-issue lobbies.

The machinery of government oversight by the New Zealand parliament is also much more politicised and consequently less effective, not least because the absence of an Upper House means a much less disinterested approach by standing parliamentary committees.

This overall political atmosphere results in not enough spending on defence (under half what Australia spends on a per capita basis). While many, Kiwis recognise that this is a serious problem, there are significant difficulties in raising and airing these in public debate.

Not least of these are that there is no New Zealand equivalent to the ADA. When retired NZDF officers speak out they are either not sufficiently apolitical in their affiliations, or are brusquely dismissed as 'geriatric generals'. As New Zealand political society is much smaller and often everyone knows everyone, Kiwi governments tend to be less comfortable with public debate and often more vindictive towards their critics. As a consequence, many Kiwis fear speaking out and risking future government business.

My two years with the NZDF really brought home to me the importance of a bipartisan, independent community watchdog on defence issues. The parliamentary and bureaucratic processes cannot, and should not, be the sole input into national security debates.'

Neil hopes to give the ADA all his effort over the next few years.

'Mike has done an incredible job in keeping the Association going with such scant resources. He couldn't have done it without the membership, and particularly those members and supporters who have so generously kicked in far more than their fair share of the financial burden.

Mike has also put the national office together in such a way that it provides a superb foundation for future growth. I see one of my priorities as working with individual members and the local chapters to grow the membership. This is not so much to strengthen our financial base. Even more importantly the government, opposition and bureaucracy react to popular pressure. If everywhere

senior figures went in Australia they met even small numbers of determined and articulate ADA members they could not so easily neglect defence issues.'

Finally, Neil's thoughts on moving the ADA national office to Canberra may be of interest to ADA members and supporters.

'The move was not a decision the ADA Board took lightly. One of the particular strengths of the ADA has been its community base throughout Australia, especially outside the Sydney–Melbourne–Canberra triangle. There is always a risk of getting unduly influenced by 'Canberra agendas'.

This said, however, the ability to positively influence the defence debate is probably strengthened by a Canberra base. Ministers, Opposition spokespersons and parliamentary backbenchers gather together there regularly. The Defence Department and the headquarters of the ADF and the three Services are in Canberra, as are the three Service 'think-tanks', and the three principal academic centres focused on national security issues. Just as importantly, the national media networks report most defence issues from their Canberra offices.

'We'll give it a try for a year or two and if a Canberra base does not work we can always move back to the real Australia.'

Neil and his wife Anne, a physiotherapist, have three children: Ashling, Maeve and Declan. Given the Association's relatively limited resources, taking over from Mike will be, to some extent, a challenge for the whole family. But as Anne and Neil have noted, 'if Mike and Colleen can so successfully bring up five children we can certainly bring up three'.

In closing, I must say that it is difficult to do Neil justice in such a short article so would encourage any ADA member or supporter to give him a ring if I have been unable to provide an adequate profile. I know I speak for many ADA members when I wish Neil and his family well for the future.

Weakness on the part of a major power risks war, not only for that power, but also for all the other nations depending on international checks and balances to maintain peace.

Thomas Sowell