

Credibility overboard again

Despite entrenched suspicions in some quarters as to the integrity of the Howard Government, the latest information flow bungle in the Department of Defence would probably have also happened under a Labor administration. As with the so-called ‘children overboard’ reporting debacle in October 2001, the major problem did not occur within the frontline ADF elements involved. Nor was either really due to the passage of information from the frontline units to intermediate headquarters, or between those headquarters and Russell Offices. In both cases the information was received in Canberra but then sidetracked or otherwise confused, diffused or misused as it threaded through the tortuous Defence (and wider) bureaucracy at the strategic level.

Two fundamental problems are involved. First, operational matters that are a wholly military professional responsibility are wrongly perceived by some within the Defence civilian bureaucracy to have ‘policy’ implications, or even worse, to be ‘higher policy’ matters. This results in much unnecessary bureaucratic meddling rather than true teamwork between the defence force and the department. Second, there is no longer a clear military chain of command (and of professional and legal accountability) from the most forward-deployed ADF element up to the Government’s principal military adviser—the Chief of Defence Force (CDF)—through his supporting strategic-level military staff (including specialist civilian advisers).

A strategic-level joint military command structure for the ADF was recommended from the early 1950s onwards. Headquarters Australian Defence Force (HQADF) was, however, not created until 1982 owing to decades of determined civilian bureaucratic opposition. It was not until HQADF took over responsibility for all defence force operations overseas in 1989 that strategic oversight and joint integration of such operations improved dramatically. There was a clear military chain of command, and appropriate accountability by any professional, disciplinary, command, constitutional and moral line of authority or standard.

In 1997, as a result of the so-called Defence Efficiency Review, HQADF and the policy bureaucracy of the Department of Defence were merged to eradicate some areas of perceived duplication. The resulting amalgam, Australian Defence Headquarters (ADHQ), is neither fish nor fowl. Its structure and practices ignore several of the principles of war (and general sound management in any type of organisation). ADHQ suffers from five main deficiencies:

- it is too big and complex and frustrates effective Ministerial grip of the ADF and the department
- civilian bureaucratic structures, practices, agendas and cultures are interposed in the military chain of command
- perpetual working-level conflict results because of the two different institutional cultures involved (both generally suitable for their respective purposes individually)

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- much effort is wasted in pursuing the chimeras of a ‘unified’ institutional culture and organisational approach
- bureaucratic meddling in military professional matters is entrenched rather than prevented.

Now when ‘children overboard’ occurred the fact that the structure was largely at fault was generally overlooked in the ensuing party-political furore. The personal failure and/or moral weakness of key individuals involved also obscured the structural failure.

This time the real causes must be tackled. ADHQ must be abolished and HQADF clearly re-established as a stand-alone, strategic-level, joint military headquarters. This would enable the CDF to respond effectively to Ministerial direction and command defence-force operations along constitutionally and professionally correct lines. It would also mean failure could be swiftly and correctly identified, rectified and punished when it occurs. ♦