

The 2004 exit survey of those leaving the ADF, and the surveys of serving regulars and reservists, powerfully explain why there have been continued shortfalls over recent years in meeting recruiting targets. They also highlight why only 75-80 per cent of recruiting targets will be met this year.

The attitude surveys since 1999 show clear trends. Demography, economics, social change and even multiculturalism are all working against the ADF attracting and retaining its core capability — its willing and trained people.

Over the last ten years, for example, the number of 20-24-year olds undertaking tertiary studies has increased from 27 to 37 per cent. The overall number of 18-30 year olds in the population is declining and will do so until 2017. The ADF is competing with all other professions, industries and vocations, in generally prosperous economic conditions, for its share of a diminishing pool of labour.

Australia is well past the era when magistrates were able to offer first offenders the choice of 'joining up' or prison. We are instead in an era where our modern defence force has to reject many applicants because of insufficient education levels, and a range of psycho-social problems such as unstable work histories, drug use and criminal records.

Moreover, the 30 per cent decline in overall ADF numbers since 1990, the recruiting shortfalls and the marked increase in operations over recent years, have had three broad effects. There are simply far fewer sailors, soldiers and airmen available to undertake or support operations. There is much less of a surge capacity within the total force to flexibly handle sudden crises or long commitments. And there are far fewer opportunities for respite postings between periods of intensive work.

As the surveys record in detail this inevitably results in retention problems. Personnel, and their families, feel increasingly crushed between the current operational tempo, insufficient numbers and wider society standards and expectations.

To deter or fight wars effectively the defence force of a democracy needs to reflect its parent society as closely as possible. What we have forgotten is the reverse side of this truism. Defence force remuneration and conditions of service cannot be allowed to get too far out of step with reasonable community norms.

Even despite the ADF's relatively limited size, and the widening gap between authorised personnel levels and the numbers actually in uniform, over 40 per cent of the annual defence budget is spent on recurrent personnel costs. We cannot again slash operating costs and capital investment to meet the wages bill, as was foolishly done throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s. Those short-sighted temporary fixes are integral causes of our current inter-related problems of recruiting shortfalls, retention strains, hollow units, operational stretch and block obsolescence.

Australian governments of all political persuasions have deliberately chosen to ignore the myriad problems of defence underinvestment for far too long, not least by over-relying on the grin-and-bear-it professionalism of our Service personnel. We have now pushed them into more of a grimace-and-bear-

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### Our cover

5/7 RAR troops of the Al Muthanna Task Group patrol the As Samawah area of southeast Iraq in late May.

it situation and they are understandably and increasingly choosing not to do so.

Fixing the personnel and other problems requires a substantial and sustained increase in the overall defence budget. The ADF cannot manage its tasks with its nominally 54,000 regulars and fewer than 20,000 generally inaccessible reserves. Its authorised strength must be increased and it must be allowed to compete more effectively for the people available. ♦