

A perennial and pervasive cultural belief in the Australian community is that conservative governments meet their national defence responsibilities better than Labor ones. The truth, with limited exceptions either way, is that governments of both political persuasions have been equally prone to neglect defence investment – and generally always keen to spend revenue elsewhere where the political and electoral advantages appear much greater. Arguably this is an inherent consequence of our three-year parliamentary cycle.

The Howard Government, for example, is often cited as increasing defence investment by some 55 per cent in dollar terms. To put this in perspective, however, social security, health and education spending all increased by more, by every measure, over the same period (even before we factor in all the additional spending in these latter three areas by the states and territories). In truth, Defence spending remains well within its long-term average band as both a percentage of the federal budget and of GDP – and well below the GDP percentages recommended as necessary in every Defence White Paper since 1976.

Five supra-partisan points of fact are particularly worth noting about defence investment:

- Beginning in 2000, nearly all the increases are catch-up investment to reverse decades of sustained neglect.
- They began only after the late 1999 East Timor crisis had proved just how badly ADF capability had deteriorated.
- The Howard government before 2000 had largely continued the sustained period of under-investment of previous Labor and Coalition governments.
- No responsible government of any political complexion could have continued to ignore, obfuscate or perpetuate the depth of neglect that existed by the early 2000s.
- The strategic calls on the ADF from September 1999 onwards, and the resulting high operational tempos, have demonstrated we need a real defence force not a notional, niche or hollow one.

In the year before the November 2007 election several inter-linked factors came together in the modernising of Labor defence policy. First, there was generational change as Kim Beazley retired and was replaced by Kevin Rudd. Second, there was clear recognition that at previous elections the Coalition had benefited greatly from the widespread perception that Labor was not as sound on national security issues. Third, there was genuine and realistic recognition of international strategic realities, and the need for a strong ADF, by key Labor figures not least Kevin Rudd.

Throughout 2007 Labor continually argued that it would maintain the higher levels of defence investment and do so because they were undoubtedly necessary – including the three per cent real increases annually out to 2016 needed to rebuild the ADF. Labor also undertook not to cancel or unduly postpone any of the long-delayed major modernisation projects then finally underway.

The Rudd Government's first defence budget therefore merits close scrutiny. Despite statements that increases to

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<i>A RAAF C-130J aircraft at its base in the Middle East Theatre of Operations. Photo courtesy of the ADF</i>	

defence investment have continued – and that they remain highly necessary – there are very disturbing signs of backsliding. That cuts are in effect being made instead, and by budgetary legerdemain (see pages 6-7), only makes this seeming betrayal worse.

17 years afterwards, our defence force is still recovering from the serious damage so thoughtlessly inflicted by the Hawke Government's 1991 Force Structure Review. Labor has consequently long suffered from community perceptions that its governments are intrinsically less reliable where national defence responsibilities are concerned. The Rudd Government needs to ensure that the 2009/10 defence budget dispels rather than reinforces this entrenched belief. ♦