

Admitting past mistakes, not politicising history

Many of our politicians of all hues tend to view Australian history through party-political prisms that reflect well on their own party and it's prominent personalities but badly on their political opponents.

More specifically, renewed slanging matches between the new government and the new opposition over past defence procurement decisions have sought to paint various blunders or successes within purely party-political narratives, rather than objectively examine what actually occurred and why.

Much of the media encourage such political mudslinging because reporting it in such terms is easier than researching the history and finding out the facts — and confrontation not explanation sells more newspapers and attracts more viewers, listeners and advertisers anyway.

The centralisation of defence reporting in Canberra's Parliamentary Press Gallery over the last decade or so exacerbates the problem. It has increased the tendency for defence issues to be reported by political journalists in political terms — rather than by specialists with a longer, deeper or coherent understanding, as occurs with most reporting on economics, science or health matters.

Every Minister for Defence is constrained by the political and economic circumstances and Cabinet dynamics of his tenure; and by the strategic circumstances of the era, including whether it is peacetime or wartime. How we remember ministerial records is also influenced by their subsequent careers and later popularity (or otherwise).

But much defence decision-making is rightly independent of party politics because it involves objective consideration of longer-term and enduring national interests. Moreover, much defence planning succeeds or fails no matter which party is in office or no matter who is the Minister for Defence.

Both sides of politics have defence initiatives to be proud of. Both have also made bad decisions that have resulted in needless strategic risks, costly procurement blunders or other long-lasting negative repercussions.

Bad decision-making can be minimised or prevented from recurring only by an objective rather than a politically-slanted appraisal of historical lessons. Ministers have to be prepared to admit that predecessor governments of their particular political hue got some things wrong, even if only in hindsight.

The 1991-92 Force Structure Review (FSR) under the Keating Government is one example among many. This, and associated measures, reduced the size of our defence force by some 30 per cent in order to satisfy short-term, politically-driven, budgetary imperatives. One no doubt unintended result has been major capability shortfalls and enduring morale and personnel retention problems in the ADF down to the present day — over 16 years afterwards. Especially, in coping with greatly increased operational tempos since the 1999 East Timor crisis.

Similarly, the highly useable Ready Reserve spawned by the FSR was abolished by the incoming Howard Government in 1996 in another seriously short-sighted and mistaken decision taken on narrow ideological grounds. The loss of

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Our cover

An Australian Army Chinook helicopter is unloaded from a USAF C-17 Globemaster II at Kandahar in Afghanistan.
Photo courtesy of the ADF

this short-notice, full-strength, three-battalion, brigade group came back to bite the ADF particularly savagely during the East Timor crisis in 1999.

Our severe shortages of infantry and cavalry have continued to constrain our strategic freedom of action in all subsequent crises.

Reactive political mudslinging about the purported competence or otherwise of past defence decision-making needs to stop. The national interest, including the efficiency and morale of the defence force — and sustaining the confidence of the Australian people in the ADF — is more important than splashy headlines, transient political or budgetary gains, or the egos of present and past politicians. The past, and its lessons for our current and future defence efforts, must instead be confronted honestly by both the Government and the Opposition. ♦