

degree, or confusing the nature, of domestic opposition to national policy.

Within mainstream Australia, blogs and the comment pages of the established media provide some insight into the problem. When Sergeant Mathew Locke of the SASR was killed in action in Afghanistan, for example, media reporting and commentary was generally of a high standard — as would be expected in the circumstances. But the comments lodged by a small minority were more than disappointing in their callousness, ignorance, malevolence or warped senses of humour or perspective. In one of many examples, a short AAP story run on *news.com.au* at 10:44AM on 26 October 2007 generated 194 on-line comments by 5:00PM. Now most of the 194 comments would widely be regarded as acceptable contributions to public debate even where too many appeared not that well informed on the issues.

Seven comments (three per cent), however, were highly offensive or provocative. Some stated or inferred that ADF personnel were ‘murderers’, ‘deserved what they got for being the aggressor’ or that because ‘no-one is forced to join the ADF’ the death of a soldier is somehow the soldier’s fault. All seemed to miss the point that in fighting wars the ADF does so on behalf of us all and only at the lawful direction of the elected government.

A further 53 comments (27 per cent) criticised Australia’s participation in the Iraq or Afghanistan wars but generally acknowledged the tragic loss of a digger. The remaining 134 comments (70 per cent) paid courteous tribute to Sergeant Locke with many also taking issue with the offensive comments or opposition to the wars. It was noteworthy that the bulk of these latter comments were generally made in a calm and reasoned manner — in stark contrast to the offensive three per cent.

The example described is hardly definitive in terms of determining the numbers of Australians who might be unusually vulnerable to enemy subversion or exploitation. Nor the larger numbers who might be otherwise useful to the enemy, to some extent, because they oppose our participation in the wars concerned to varying degrees. The sample involved only those who have Internet access, read *news.com.au*, do so during the day and were motivated to comment. It was also one of those thankfully rare occasions when we have had a digger killed in action and the incentive to comment, on both sides, might be assumed to be greater than normal.

But it does highlight two important facts that are ultimately fundamental to the way liberal democracies such as Australia wage war successfully. It also reminds us of dangerous trends that if not checked, could develop into a serious problem. First, there are definitely some Australians who, knowingly or unknowingly, may be bolstering the will of the enemies we are fighting. Second, the world-wide-web now gives them a much greater opportunity to do so. They are no longer isolated from each other or from a ready means of contact with those our country is fighting, and they now have much greater access to a means of spreading their message domestically and internationally. ♦

Modern counter subversion – relearning old lessons

Countering subversive behaviour must be done carefully. Any counter-measures must distinguish between allowing legitimate dissent and countering ill-informed, extremist or potentially seditious or treasonable actions. Public refutation of the latter by responsible Ministers, including warning of the dangers involved, is an obvious first step.

At the very least, where extremists or polemicists deliberately describe ADF personnel as ‘murderers’, ‘mercenaries’, as ‘deserving death’ or worse, they should be publicly condemned by the government and responsible commentators in the media, academia and general community. Throughout the early 1990s the then Minister for Defence, Senator Robert Ray, was very forceful in this regard. His strong condemnation of a Victorian high school textbook for misdescribing ADF personnel as ‘harmworkers’ (in supposed contrast to health workers) set a good example of what is needed

Few Australians now have much contact with the ADF on a day-to-day basis. Even fewer have personal or family experience of war and what is required to win one. Understandings that were previously instinctive or widely spread in the Australian community are generally no longer as common. Some principles and facts to do with national defence therefore need public re-emphasis by the Government, public commentators and the media. Key points include:

- The ADF is our defence force and is comprised of fellow Australians not strangers or, according to some, supposedly depraved militarist automatons bent on killing for its own sake.
- Our defence force defends all Australians equally and has long protected our right to free speech and belief, including to legitimate dissent from government decisions to send the ADF to war.
- The ADF prosecutes its operations in accordance with international law and only at the lawful direction of the elected government.
- Our defence force is duly and rightly apolitical institutionally in the public controversies of the day, and this neutrality of culture and action is a fundamental tenet of liberal democratic societies.
- Critics of Australian foreign or strategic policy should direct their criticism at the government of the day, not at the ADF collectively or the individuals serving in the defence force and their families.

Finally, while ignorance alone should not be a crime, the offence of criminal libel (a defamation likely to cause a breach of the peace) remains on the statute books. It is prosecuted rarely and only applies to the libel of individuals. Some thought now needs to be given to extending this to cover the collective libel of members of our defence force for doing their duty at the lawful direction of the elected government. While such prosecutions might give some the purported martyrdom they seek, it would send a strong message that untrue, unfair, malicious and often cowardly comments about our defence force are not tolerated by Australians as a whole. ♦