Promote Greg Combet don't move him

The experiment of having a dedicated parliamentary secretary for defence procurement overseeing the Defence Materiel Organisation (DMO) seems to be progressing quite well. Serious thought now needs to be given to the next logical step.

As the ADA has long argued, the Department of Defence is simply too big, too complex and often too slow-moving in its internal processes to be supervised by the one, or at best one and a half ministers, allocated to the job over the last three decades or so. Real reform has to start somewhere and increasing ministerial supervision is as good a place to start as any. It has therefore been gratifying to see the Rudd Government allocate two full-time ministers to the task and then further supplement this with two, not one, parliamentary secretaries.

At the portfolio management level the introduction of the parliamentary secretary for defence procurement has allowed the Minister for Defence the opportunity to concentrate more easily on other troubling areas of the overall portfolio. It has effectively removed the Minister's need for constant, almost day-to-day, checking on the DMO and the 40 per cent of the defence budget it spends. The Minister for Defence retains ultimate responsibility, of course, but his load has been lightened allowing him the time for greater focus on strategic, operational and capability development matters.

At the political level the new parliamentary secretary position is helping temper the public minefield that defence procurement poses for any Minister, especially as there is always so much scope for so much to go wrong in this regard. Ministers invariably cop the blame for procurement difficulties even if ministerial actions, or the lack of them, are rarely the sole or even main cause of the trouble. The existence of a parliamentary secretary also means there is someone with the time to massage industry and public expectations and concerns, and to do so coherently and consistently. A related advantage is that, to some extent, it reduces the temptation for either side of politics to play party politics with defence procurement because there is less opportunity for mischievous criticism by the Opposition or unnecessary point-scoring by the Government.

At the bureaucratic level there are obvious advantages in having someone of at least parliamentary secretary level take day-to-day responsibility for overseeing the highest paid public servant in the Commonwealth and the large and important agency he heads. The perception that this is occurring is just as important as the reality. It is also of great assistance to the CEO of the DMO because it relieves him of some of the burden, even if only psychologically, of running such a large, diverse, frequently controversial and often publicly misunderstood organisation.

At the coalface of DMO-industry relations the creation of a dedicated parliamentary secretary for defence procurement has provided both an additional conduit for the flow of ideas both ways and a useful means of letting off steam on both sides. The parliamentary secretary has been able to put across messages that previously had to be delivered by the CEO of the DMO, or usually less successfully by various Ministers for Defence often perceived as remote from the immediacy of the matter at hand. This was not only a distraction at times from the DMO head's other duties it also unnecessarily muddied the waters between political, legal and commercial matters.

The apparent success of the position of parliamentary secretary for defence procurement and, it must be said, the work of the first incumbent, means active consideration should now be given to upgrading the appointment to a junior minister within the Defence portfolio. The importance of the role and the financial delegations involved (greater than any existing junior minister) make this a commonsense step. It would also allow the Minister for Defence greater legal and procedural flexibility in his delegations to such a junior minister.

Irrespective of the review into defence procurement and sustainment by David Mortimer (Chairman of Leighton Holdings), or the question of whether the DMO should be a prescribed or executive agency, the advantages of it being supervised by a junior and senior minister in the Defence portfolio are considerable.

Finally, there is another good reason for making Greg Combet's job a full junior ministership. It means he can be left there to keep plugging away at the myriad problems requiring day-to-day, not desultory or interrupted, ministerial supervision. Leaving this important task at the level of a parliamentary secretary, whilst an improvement on the old arrangement of only part-time ministerial supervision, risks the able Combet being quickly promoted to a junior ministry elsewhere before his task is completed.

To the considerable frustration of people in the ADF and DMO, and to the detriment of the wider reform program and the Defence Capability Plan, this is what occurred in the previous government. The two or three junior ministers or parliamentary secretaries who were much good were unfortunately promoted elsewhere after very short stints in the Defence portfolio. The flip side of this, of course, was that the reverse happened with the marginal-seat holding duds parachuted into the junior jobs in the Defence portfolio to give them some public profile for party-political purposes. The ADF and DMO were generally stuck with such duds for long periods – or at least it seemed long at the time – because there was nowhere else for them to go. Although in at least one case, one of those widely regarded as a dud parliamentary secretary in Defence actually ended up making cabinet rank eventually anyway. ◆

Mercenary motives or just plain racism

The odd suggestion has arisen again that the ADF could perhaps solve its recruiting shortfalls by recruiting foreign citizens as temporary guest workers, particularly from South Pacific island countries where unemployment, under-employment and general economic under-development are endemic. As made clear several times in recent years the ADA remains adamantly opposed to such a policy on a number of moral and practical grounds.

Discussion of such recruitment generally seems to occur without sufficient knowledge of the facts concerning current

ADF recruitment policies, or of the complex practices adopted by those foreign countries such as the UK and India (with the Ghurkas) and France (with the Foreign Legion) who employ some foreigners as troops. Not least of the latter are the segregation of foreign personnel in their own units with separate cultural traditions, restrictions on the rank they can attain even within such units, their command by officers of host-country nationality on purely citizenship or ethnic grounds and, to some extent, remuneration that is set at rates less than those applying to personnel who are citizens of the host country concerned.

Advocacy of the guest worker option also usually ignores that the ADF already recruits overseas (including South Pacific islanders) among those who qualify for emigration to Australia as permanent residents and potential citizens. Moreover the 'guest worker as potential temporary digger' idea is based on a false assumption or misunderstanding about the nature of the ADF's recruiting problems. The recruiting shortfalls in general enlistments have largely been overcome, especially in the Army and the Air Force. The remaining deficiencies in professional and technical trades are unlikely to be met by many South Pacific islanders and where they are, such potential enlistees would probably qualify for permanent residence in Australia anyway.

Some have thus suggested that our immigration standards and policies could or should be relaxed to the extent that we grant permanent residency to foreigners supposedly willing to fight for us – but who would otherwise not qualify for immigration to Australia on skills, education or other grounds. This suggestion is taking the idea beyond the guest worker stage and would in any case risk compromising the integrity of our immigration policy on a range of equity, citizenship policy, social cohesion, and economic efficiency grounds. It would also raise serious moral questions akin to legalising the immigration of prostitutes on the spurious claim that Australians would then not have to undertake paid sex work.

There has also traditionally been a general reluctance to admit guest workers to Australia because of fears such a step might undermine Australian working conditions and cost Australians their job. While union opposition to guest workers in the wider economy may be weakening, the ADF should not be leading the charge in an area that could be politically and socially divisive.

Finally there are two compelling moral issues involved. First, what type of society is unwilling to defend itself or is not worth defending by its own people? National defence is a universal civic responsibility of all Australians, like jury duty, not something that can be duck-shoved on indigent foreigners as a matter of our convenience and in exploitation of their desperation. If the problem of maintaining our defence force at the required strength is supposedly serious enough to warrant the temporary employment of foreign guest workers, then surely a large range of other measures should be tried first. We could and should, for example, first raise ADF pay rates so the Services could compete effectively with labour market forces and if this did not work, introduce selective or universal conscription to meet recruiting shortfalls.

Second, and even more disturbingly, at least some of the motivation for suggesting the temporary hiring of South Pacific islanders to fight and potentially die for us, for money, appears driven by the subliminal, and in some cases open, belief that young black males from the South Pacific are naturally violent, or naturally 'warriors', so will make good soldiers. This is condescending belief masquerading as anthropological or social theory at best. At worst it is unadulterated racism, particularly where it assumes that such foreign soldiers would be expendable replacements for young Australians. ◆

No more Burchett and Hicks-type dilemmas

With the expiry of the gag order negotiated in his plea bargain of guilty before a US Military Commission, David Hicks has no legal restrictions from telling his side of the story. Under Australian law governing the proceeds of crime he is, however, officially thought to be unable to profit financially from doing so. Whether this is the case or not may yet be tested in the courts.

The ADA has long criticised the gag order as unnecessary and indeed counter-productive to the principles and national interest issues underlying such cases. As with the example of Mamdouh Habib, the sooner the Australian public can weigh up Hicks' account first-hand, and make its own judgements about him directly, the better.

Up until now many on both sides of the Hicks controversy have ignored evidence and argument that contradicts what they want to believe. The general politicisation of the matter, and the absence of David Hicks being able to speak for himself, has also allowed the Hicks camp considerable licence to generate subjective publicity for his cause when agitating for his release from detention. Many are the interviews, for example, where Hicks' father has not been challenged by objective and informed media questioning about inconsistencies in his claims concerning his son, perhaps for fear it might have delayed Hicks' release. Now David Hicks is free from gaol and the gag there is no longer any excuse for holding back from proper scrutiny of Hick's beliefs and actions.

One major reform from the Hicks saga is that the legal, moral and practical dilemmas of such cases are unlikely to be repeated. It may have taken nearly 60 years for the appropriate legislation to be passed, following Wilfred Burchett's activities with the Chinese and North Koreans during the Korean War (and perhaps the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War), but Australian law finally includes offences covering actions that assist the enemy in time of war where these fall short of outright treason (the illegal overthrow of the Australian government).

The technical loopholes and lack of specific legislation that allowed Burchett to escape prosecution have finally been closed. This also means that the lack of legislation that prevented David Hicks from being tried for criminal offences in Australia, and which consequently delayed his release for such a trial from detention as a captured combatant