

## Defence is a trust not a cash cow

Since Kevin Rudd assumed the federal leadership of the Labor Party at the end of 2006 we have seen a pronounced move to fresh thinking on defence issues within Labor circles. Coincidentally, or probably not, there has also been increased bipartisan agreement on strategic policy and defence capability development generally.

In an election year, of course, both sides of politics are prone to deny such convergence when seeking to differentiate their product electorally, but many partisan disagreements on defence are really more apparent than real.

Labor's new leadership seems to have absorbed significant lessons from the Mark Latham debacle. The 2004 election was largely lost because the electorate looked beyond the hype and sensed things it distrusted in a potential prime-minister. Not least of these concerned national defence, where most voters of all hues disagreed with Latham's old-fashioned, virulent anti-Americanism, his boorish contempt for those undertaking military service, and his shoot-from-the-hip style of decision-making on military-strategic issues.

More recently, continuing strategic uncertainty, the necessary rebuilding of the ADF after decades of comparative neglect, and the generational move from Beazley to Rudd have all contributed to defence policy reform within Labor. In particular, the ALP has been able to shed the personal history, shibboleths and outmoded theories of the late Cold-War era that kept Kim Beazley in thrall long after the international strategic situation had moved on.

While there is little doubt Kevin Rudd has modern, balanced and shrewd general instincts where defence strategy is concerned, some unease persists about others in Labor's leadership group. Fears remain that some Labor parliamentarians are still infected with the simplistic defence-of-Australia dogma or harbour fantasies about renewing rampant bureaucratic managerialism at Russell Offices.

Well, we will know soon enough if or when Labor wins this year's election – an event likely to be decided anyway on social and economic issues alone. Defence issues will sway even fewer votes, either way, this time around, due in part to Labor's fresh thinking.

But whichever side of politics assumes government, Australia will still face one serious and long-term threat to effective defence planning and adequate resourcing. Governments of both political persuasions are now addicted electorally to the ever-greater diversion of federal resources to areas of social and infrastructure spending that are the constitutional responsibility of the states and territories.

But the defence of Australia, its people and its interests will always be a wholly federal responsibility – and one needing long-term and diligent attention. The ever-increasing diversion of federal revenues to areas of spending formerly the exclusive or primary responsibility of the states (and to middle-class welfare) is inevitably affecting the funds considered politically available to ensure our common defence. This short-sighted policy must change.

To many voters (and indeed many politicians) defence is an issue that barely enters their day-to-day consciousness. When it does, the instinctive reaction of many is to try and avoid thinking about it because it might be unpleasant, difficult or require complex moral and intellectual choices.

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#### Our cover

*Reconstruction Task Force troops construct an Afghan National Police post in Oruzgan Province despite two Taliban attacks during the six-day task.*

*Photo courtesy of the ADF*

A related phenomenon is the commonplace assumption that *someone else* is no doubt worrying about it so why bother.

Labor's promise to quarantine defence spending from any post-election razor gang is a realistic admission that Australia cannot repeat the prolonged neglect of defence investment during the 1980s and 1990s under governments of both political persuasions. Indeed the current boost to defence spending is mainly to cancel out those decades of sustained under-investment.

No matter which party forms the next government, they must make sure the Australian people realise that any cutting back on needed defence spending to satisfy short-term social desires, or arrange political fixes, means the current generation is selfishly gambling with the security of their children and grandchildren. ♦