



## Elections, wartime and bipartisanship

As the ADA has pointed out for most of this year, defence issues have not been prominent in the election campaign so far, nor are they likely to be, because of the broad political consensus on most national security issues, certainly the more important ones. This is comforting in itself and doubly so because the bipartisanship is based on a sound appreciation of the issues by both sides of politics.

This stands in marked contrast to the last period of supposed bipartisanship on defence issues, in the early 1990s, which was unfortunately based on the opposite – and on both sides. This damaging era of unsound agreement prolonged the already lengthy period of sustained under-investment in our defence capabilities of the late 1970s and 1980s; a period only ended in large part by our very lucky escape from serious strategic embarrassment during the 1999 East Timor crisis. ●

## We are all at war

Despite happening during the informal and then the formal election campaign our recent tragic loss of two soldiers killed in action in Afghanistan has been generally accepted with the sober national maturity it deserves. Both the Coalition and the Labor Party support our military commitment to Afghanistan. No matter which side of politics was in office we would still have troops fighting in that country. This understanding seems well accepted generally.

Those who have attempted to politicise our casualties to make ideological points about issues such as the Australia-US alliance, or the perceived evils of the Howard Government, usually realise this too but are recklessly prepared to endanger our deployed forces in pursuit of their own, generally extremist, agenda. Unfortunately, some in the media have egged them on for commercial gain, individual ambition, shared prejudices or an inability to recognise the actual or potential dangers involved.

The overall and underlying problem that allows this is that many Australians, no matter how unconsciously, persist in wrongly believing that our military efforts in Afghanistan (and indeed Iraq) are somehow being fought by *someone else* and not by fellow Australians on their behalf.

In most cases this attitude of disengagement stems from simple indifference, ignorance or apathy as few Australians have day-to-day contact with members of our defence force and their families, and many pay little attention to international events anyway. In at least some cases it is because ideological objections to the original intervention in Iraq have wrongly coloured perceptions about Australian participation in Afghanistan, despite this being a UN-endorsed operation from the beginning. This disengagement must be addressed and reversed. ●

### Highlights:

- At long last, informed bipartisan agreement on defence
- All Australians are at war not just our defence force
- Criticism of war must stop short of aiding the enemy
- Afghanistan is a war and a NATO-led one at that
- Beating up breast surgery in the ADF
- Poor media coverage of defence issues causes offence
- Irony Corner: Colonel Paul Tibbets

## Comforting the wrong side

In yet further cases even more harmful trends are emerging. Comments by some on various blogs and newspaper websites have suggested that ADF casualties somehow “deserve what they get” just for being in the defence force or for being involved in alleged “illegal wars”. At best, such comments simply ignore that in a democracy the defence force necessarily follows the lawful orders of the elected government, and that any other option is unthinkable.

More generally, such views ignore or unreasonably discount the risks that our defence force personnel take to defend all Australians equally – even those who profess to wish them harm. On a more personal basis such views also ignore the major sacrifices some bereaved Australian families have already made in this war, and the daily gnawing fear other Australians endure while their family members are similarly deployed overseas.

These ill-intentioned views are nothing short of despicable in the ignorance, insensitivity and moral cowardice they display. But advancing such views is not just a matter of bad taste nor is it, by any reasonable judgement, excusable as an exercise of legitimate dissent in open and balanced debate. It is unequivocally giving aid and comfort to the enemy and should be prosecuted as such when it results from more than plain ignorance.

But even legitimate public debate in Australia on our commitment to Afghanistan is often not as aware or as measured as it needs to be. All wars are ultimately tests of will and all wars end when one side decides to give up. In modern warfare, the globalisation of communications means that the Taliban can easily monitor our domestic debates via satellite television and the world-wide-web. Their understanding of Australian public debate may not be sophisticated, or attuned to nuance, but such debate is clearly part of the war we are all fighting as a nation.

Commentary in Australia must not mistakenly give the Taliban the idea that our national will is faltering or can be made to weaken. This is not only a strategic-level matter concerning the war as a whole; it is also one of immediate consequence to our troops on the ground. The last thing that needs to happen is that any Taliban elements wrongly come to believe that inflicting casualties on our troops might somehow make us quit – and that therefore they should increase their attacks accordingly. ●

## Cato not Nato

Some of our coalition allies in Afghanistan have sustained significantly heavier casualties than Australia. Even several of the NATO countries being heavily criticised by fellow NATO members for the operational limitations they place on where their troops can be deployed, and what they can do, have sustained higher casualties than us. But there can be no doubt that the brunt of NATO's effort has been predominantly and disproportionately borne by the USA, UK and Canada – and that this must stop if the war is to be won.

Otto von Bismarck once noted that “the whole of the Balkans was not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier”. Recent claims by the German foreign minister that Afghanistan is peacekeeping and not war perhaps signal a return to Bismarckian terminology bereft of any thread of Bismarckian realism. The West faces a long war in Afghanistan and all NATO members must fully help to fight it and win it. ●

## Inter-operability in action

The NATO-led campaign in Afghanistan is a coalition effort and Australia is just a junior member of that coalition. Even within Oruzgan Province we are a junior partner to the Netherlands in the overall attempt to bolster the capacity and writ of the Kharzai government. Should the Netherlands decide to reduce the size of its military commitment or, now less likely, withdraw completely in 2008, replacing the Dutch with another NATO member is not a simple matter of just finding somebody willing to join us in Oruzgan.

The operational co-operation between the Netherlands and Australia in the province has been generally successful. Minor differences in respective rules-of-engagement have not involved matters of principle or much affected operations on the ground. Differences in operational culture exist but again are mutually respected and not of sufficient gravity to seriously affect planning and operations. Dutch respect for ADF efforts is genuine and reciprocated by the Australians, especially concerning Dutch artillery and attack helicopter support when our troops operate at significant distances from the shared base at Tarin Khowt.

The commitment to fight together in Oruzgan was only taken when both countries were satisfied that the other posed no undue operational risk to their own soldiers. It was also an optimum solution that only two countries were involved and that most Dutch military personnel speak good English.

Bringing in other NATO members is a question of establishing whether similar levels of mutual operational confidence and operational co-operation can be maintained. This is an entirely separate and more difficult question than whether other NATO partners willing to fight in southern Afghanistan can be found. ●

## Storm in a D-cup

Recent stories in the media on various defence matters have continued an unfortunate trend of sensationalist, inaccurate and uninformed media coverage. The contrived “furore” over “tax-payer funds” allegedly “being wasted” on breast enhancement surgery was yet another example.

In this particular case, despite the facts being known by the journalist and the *Sunday Telegraph*, they went ahead anyway and wrongly created the impression that female ADF personnel are receiving such surgery for no purpose other than the supposed cosmetic desires of the individuals concerned. Various talkback radio programs promptly jumped on the stampeding bandwagon.

In fact, only a very small number of such surgical procedures have been undertaken, and then only to treat properly diagnosed medical conditions, mostly the need to repair physical injuries and disabilities or as post-operative treatment for diseases such as breast cancer. In five cases only over the last three years has it also been undertaken as part of the treatment for psychological disabilities. That these cases stem from psychological more than physical causes is effectively irrelevant.

Because of medical privacy requirements the precise details of each case are unknown. The ADA has full confidence, however, that such treatment would only be undertaken as a last resort, after extensive medical review, and we have full confidence in the professional expertise of the doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists concerned.

Although this particular issue involves disabilities rather than casualties, given the historical ratio of psychiatric and psychological casualties to physical ones in war, the ADA is also uneasy at the general presumption by many critics that only physical disabilities, injuries or wounds count. This type of thoughtless attitude has long hampered the treatment and wider community acceptance of ADF personnel suffering more serious psychiatric ills such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The publicity given to this tiny number of medical treatments seems motivated by nothing more than a desire to sell newspapers through encouraging prurient impulses. This is as sexist as it is unprofessional. The general medical privacy of the ADF personnel concerned has been violated for no public benefit. Even worse, given that the treatment was for a psychological disability, the unwarranted publicity unforgivably risks the long-term recovery of these individuals. ●

## Further media insensitivity

The real lesson, sadly, is not any supposed waste of “tax-payer’s money” in breast surgery for ADF personnel but the shallow and unprofessional nature of the reporting and the apparently callous motivation behind it. There are far more important stories about our defence force or wider defence capabilities that need to be covered, especially as the ADF is currently fighting several wars on behalf of all Australians. Why, for example, is there not informed and sensitive media coverage given to the disproportionate sacrifices being made by the 20,000 or so Australian families with members serving with the ADF in war zones each year?

The paucity of empathy or understanding about the defence force by some journalists and commentators is also causing serious offence at times. Most but not all appears unintended.

Media intrusion into the privacy of the bereaved is a wider problem than just defence force families but recent examples with the latter have been particularly disappointing. With both the Blackhawk crash off Fiji in November 2006, and the recent combat death of Trooper David Pearce in Afghanistan, one particular newspaper has had reporters knocking on doors in ADF married quarter areas trying to interview the new widow within hours of her bereavement. Such callously intrusive behaviour is naturally causing outrage among ADF families and the defence force generally.

Other media coverage has been insensitive but not deliberately so. The use of file footage showing the return-to-Australia ceremonies for previous ADF deaths has too often not edited out the original grieving family concerned. When such footage is consequently repeated to illustrate subsequent deaths, often ad nauseum, this has triggered renewed or worsened grief in the original family. This is easily fixed by sensitive editing and, to their credit, this is usually done when pointed out directly but surely it should not need to be pointed out in the first place.

There has also been an unfortunate trend recently where media descriptions of how ADF personnel have died has implied, however inadvertently, that there is somehow a hierarchy of worth involved in their deaths. Now the Australian tradition has always been that all deaths in combat are equal, and honoured equally, no matter how the casualty occurred – with all described as *killed in action*. Similarly, all personnel wounded are properly described as *wounded in action* and thereafter as *wounded* and never as *injured*.

Some journalists have sought to defend these departures from long-established Australian custom by claiming that they must write stories that can be understood by the general public. But surely it is better to help educate those members of the public unfamiliar with correct protocol, rather than encourage offence to the fallen, their families and friends through inattention to professional journalistic detail and honoured national custom. ●

## Irony corner

The long-range B-2 stealth bombers of the USAF’s 393<sup>rd</sup> Bombardment Squadron (of Hiroshima and Nagasaki fame) are currently commanded by Colonel Paul W. Tibbets IV. ●