



Steady as she goes at the helm?

There is a tendency for many commentators, especially in academia and the media, to discuss defence issues in solely party-political terms. The recent change of government is currently encouraging this flawed perspective. But when ideology is eschewed, the essential continuities of Australia's strategic situation, and the necessary continued rebuilding of the ADF after sustained under-investment throughout the 1980s and 1990s (under both Coalition and Labor governments), will soon start to reimpose objective realities – however unrecognised by some.

The Rudd Government's new team at the national security helm has largely adopted a "steady as she goes" approach. There has been the odd announcement or hint of product differentiation politically but this is to be expected. The elevation of the previous Minister for Defence to Opposition Leader is also bound to result in defence decision-making over recent years attracting more party-political crossfire than might otherwise occur.

The grip of the new National Security Committee of Cabinet (NSCC) faces inevitable comparisons with its Coalition predecessor which, politics and personalities aside, had the immense advantage of continuity in key members over many years. The maturation of the NSCC as an institution of government over the last decade has had major benefits. The Rudd-led NSCC would do well to build on this progress rather than reinvent the wheel for its own sake, or tinker for transient political expediency, as occurred under Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke.

In wishing his successor well, within obvious limits, retiring Minister for Defence, Brendan Nelson, observed that no-one leaves that portfolio the same as they entered it. Joel Fitzgibbon began to be changed by the potential and actual responsibilities of the role even as shadow defence spokesman over the last year.

It takes any Minister for Defence several months to come to grips with such a large, diverse, complex and morally tough portfolio. As Minister, Fitzgibbon appears to be surmounting key issues as quickly as his immediate two predecessors and more so than several others did.

He is also greatly assisted by a much larger and full-time team – a long overdue and major reform in ministerial control of the Defence portfolio. Moreover, junior minister, Warren Snowdon, has had a long interest in defence matters even when this was politically unfashionable. The two parliamentary secretaries, Greg Combet and Dr Mike Kelly, have excellent backgrounds in their portfolio responsibilities. This augurs well unless promotions elsewhere occur too speedily. ●

Highlights:

- Continuity and change in defence management
- The perils of writing Defence white papers
- The art of writing a white paper that works
- NT Anti-discrimination Commissioner loses it
- Breast reconstruction surgery in the ADF
- Irony Corner: The cancellation of Project Waler 23 years on and Taur Matan Ruak flails around again

Solving our defence dilemmas not denying or camouflaging them again

The Rudd Government is shortly to announce the way forward for preparing the Defence white paper promised on winning the election.

Under governments of both political persuasions the ADA has long criticised the failings of previous white papers (and strategic updates) to meet either public expectations or government responsibilities.

The defence funding needs identified and promised in successive papers have, with the exception of the 2000 version, failed to be allocated subsequently. Until Australia was thoroughly mugged by reality in the 1999 East Timor crisis, throughout the 1976-2000 period flawed white papers and insufficient defence investment produced a hollow, unbalanced and ill-equipped defence force unsuited to the tasks actually levied on it. Defence policies and strategies were also developed more to explain away, or paper over, the ADF's deficiencies than to tackle Australia's real strategic circumstances honestly, effectively and over the long term.

This situation entrenched the short-termist and intellectually bankrupt (but politically convenient) practice whereby defence policy and strategy was driven by the funding thought to be available politically, rather than robustly assessing our strategic situation and then resourcing and risk-managing our current and future defence postures accordingly.

Consequently, the Hawke Government had insufficient strategic options to employ in Australia's interests in the 1987, Fiji coup crises, the 1988 crisis in Vanuatu, the 1991 Gulf War, the 1991-93 Cambodia peacekeeping mission and the 1992-93 peacekeeping deployment in Somalia. More recently, and even more seriously, the Howard Government was hamstrung and Australia's strategic risks significantly increased during the 1999 East Timor Crisis. The legacy of the long period of failure continues to limit Australia's current strategic choices concerning our contributions (large, small or even not at all) to the coalition wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This alone surely warns any Australian government against ever listening again to the siren songs of those theorists responsible for such a long catalogue of disastrous failure. They can contribute opinions but their hands, either seen or unseen, must be kept as far away from the wheel, and indeed the bridge, as is possible. ●

Developing strategic options that work

White papers and strategic updates are, of course, only declaratory statements that address widely varying domestic and foreign audiences. In contrast to the formal (and classified) strategic basis papers of old – which have not really been produced for the last two decades – white papers and public strategic updates have often not tackled core issues as honestly or as comprehensively as is needed.

The processes by which previous white papers and updates were prepared have also been deficient in their whole-of-government national security focus and, indeed, even in the intellectual integrity of their whole-of-Defence consultations. The nadir was when Defence civilian bureaucrats were given such untrammelled rein that they permitted the Service Chiefs only 24 hours to comment on the final version of ASP97. Consultations on *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* were little better.

The preparation of the 2008 Defence white paper can avoid or minimise these pitfalls with a few commonsense steps.

First, the National Security Committee of Cabinet must remain actively engaged and not allow the Defence bureaucracy (or wider Public Service one) to dictate how problems should be tackled and answered.

Second, the steering of the Defence aspects of the paper's preparation should be delegated collectively to the Chiefs of Service Committee (which includes the Secretary of the Department of Defence as a permanently invited member). This would ensure no avenue of appropriate professional expertise is excluded, circumvented, diluted misrepresented or suppressed as has occurred previously.

Third, assessing Australia's potential strategic challenges over future decades should be based on a formal strategic intelligence estimate that excludes or minimises subjective influences. Such influences usually coalesce around the failed notion that the future can be predicted with such accuracy that the structure of the ADF can be decided in detail decades into the future. They include individual or collective expertise alone (real or perceived), cultural fashions in the bureaucracy or defence force, and transient or dominant academic fads and ideological fixations. Not to mention the legacy protection imperatives of former Defence officials, some now ensconced in academia, still trying to explain away the disasters of the past and their part in them.

Fourth, only then should a comprehensive, formal strategic appreciation on the defence of Australia and its interests be prepared.

Fifth, a formal (and classified) strategic basis paper should then be prepared to set out our defence policy and the strategies whereby it will be implemented.

Sixth, only then should a Defence white paper be prepared and published to explain those aspects which can be shared publicly and diplomatically.●

Racing towards idiocy in the NT

The Northern Territory's Anti-discrimination Commissioner, Tony Fitzgerald, has rejected Raytheon Australia's case for an exemption from the territory's anti-discrimination laws. Put simply, the commissioner is wrong and not just because his view contradicts the legal precedents established in all other jurisdictions that have addressed such matters.

Raytheon should not have had to seek an exemption in the first place to employ staff on security grounds based on citizenship. No racial discrimination is involved because citizenship and race are not synonymous. This is also justifiably a non-discriminatory matter of citizenship, its responsibilities and obligations – and the ability citizenship records confer in confirming individual identity and assessing loyalty and reliability.

The ability of our defence force and supporting defence industries to selectively but fairly recruit and employ on citizenship grounds for national security purposes is a long-established and well-proven practice throughout the last century or more. Moreover, there are no viable alternatives to this on legal, moral and practical grounds.

As *Defender* and *Defence Brief* have discussed several times in recent years, the ADA considers that continued failure by State and Territory government officials to understand the issues involved invokes the need for Commonwealth intervention to ensure reform. With this latest decision by Commissioner Fitzgerald, in defiance of context, facts and precedent, the time for the Commonwealth to step in has now definitely arrived.

A uniform and commonsense approach now needs to be enforced by federal legislation. As an essential and national defence matter, the defence and citizenship heads of power in the constitution clearly over-ride the supposed application of State and Territory anti-discrimination laws to national defence purposes, especially when they are being so regularly misapplied by State and Territory officials in the first place.●

Telegraphing your base motivations

Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* has again run a sensationalist, highly inaccurate and insensitive article concerning the tiny number of female ADF personnel suffering physical or psychological complaints, or incurring occupational health and safety problems, that need breast reconstruction surgery. The *Sunday Telegraph's* continued disregard for the medical privacy of those concerned, especially those recovering from diagnosed psychological conditions, is contemptible.

As noted in the September-October *Defence Brief* the facts are quite different to the paper's emotive claims. The ADA retains full confidence in the professional judgements of the treating doctors, psychiatrists and psychologists. Moreover, the previous Minister for Defence, a physician, investigated the paper's first bout of allegations and found them without foundation.

If, as the *Sunday Telegraph* claims, the new Minister for Defence, has called for a review of the healthcare policies and practices concerned we have no doubt their medical integrity will again be upheld.

But surely it is now time for the Minister and the ADF to also take this matter to the Press Council. The reporter concerned has been clearly unprofessional in her continued disregard for facts and expert advice that contradict her apparent personal prejudices or at-all-cost ambitions. The same applies to the *Sunday Telegraph's* insensitive pursuit of advertising. We note, for example, that the only advertisements on the on-line version of the story were for cosmetic surgeons.●

Irony corner

- A subunit of our Overwatch Battle Group in southern Iraq, equipped with a mix of lightly armoured wheeled vehicles (ASLAVs and Bushmaster armoured trucks) but none of our hundreds of ancient M-113 armoured personnel carriers, is called Combat Team *Waler*.
- East Timorese CDF, Taur Matan Ruark, accused the international security force of incompetence.●