



Thinking not posturing needed

The interim report of the Force Posture Review team (former Secretaries of the Department of Defence, Ric Smith and Alan Hawke) produced few real surprises but caused considerable media and public confusion. The biggest initial but generally illogical effect was a surge of expectations in various cities and regions that they might get new defence force base. This in turn unleashed a wave of pork-barrelling and other rent-seeking claims from state and local governments, and chambers of commerce, across the country.

Four key points have been generally ignored:

- The enduring factors governing our defence strategy, the operations and posture to execute it, and the bases needed by the ADF to do so, are the constraints of Australia's strategic geography, oceanography, demography and disposition of national industrial, engineering and transport resources.
- The strategic and operational posture of our defence force, and where it is based, are related but not the same. ADF elements do not have to be based in a particular region in order to operate there effectively. Instead, the key to maximising the ADF's deterrence value and force projection capabilities is to maximise its strategic and operational mobility. And maximise its access to commercial and national infrastructure on interior lines of operation and support.
- As the report carefully noted (even though many academic and media commentators missed it), improving the ADF's posture it is generally more a matter of improving the capacity of existing ADF bases to support the defence force rather than establishing major new ones.
- The job of the Department of Defence is defence, not national development. The financial value to particular communities of having a defence force base located there must always be secondary to the strategic needs of the country as a whole, the operational capabilities and needs of the ADF, and best value for taxpayers nationally.

The purpose of the posture review remains somewhat unclear as such a review should logically follow, not precede, the ongoing force structure review being developed as a foundation of the next Defence white paper. It appears instead that the review was sparked by some ministerial thinking about answering the desire by the NSW government for cruise ship access to Fleet Base East in Sydney Harbour. Some inchoate concerns by the Minister for Defence about the strategic security of the resources industry in his home state of Western Australia were then thrown into the mix and yet another Defence review was born.

Highlights:

- Force posture review: The realities not the cash registers
- Reviewing Defence: Why review teams need much better cross-disciplinary balance
- Developing experienced prime-ministerial contenders
- The myth of Defence "killing off" its ministers
- Stephen Smith: The background to the problem
- Stephen Smith: Slow-marching to a constitutional crisis
- Stephen Smith: What does his time as Minister for Defence tell us about his suitability for higher office?
- Irony Corner: Choosing between indecisive control freaks

Emerging US strategic realignments have also been proposed as necessitating an immediate review of our force posture. Such spin is less than considered thinking. It would clearly have been better to wait the short period until new US strategic thinking and the actual effects of budgetary constraints on US defence capabilities were clearer, and ostensible regional reactions to recent US announcements quieten down. That both the Minister and his shadow are Western Australians also seems to have had some effect. The vague justifications offered by the Minister include obvious plays to some traditional, but generally invalid, strategic fears among parts of the WA electorate.

The NSW Government wants cruise ship access to Garden Island, of course, because successive NSW administrations have neglected investment in harbour infrastructure. Just as all mainland state governments reflexively go for the "cheap fix" (for them) and demand the transfer of Defence landholdings (which are national infrastructure) when their urban land management policies or serial underinvestment in urban transport infrastructure distort the state's housing and transport markets. However, the cruise ship diversion — in both senses of the word — issue also inadvertently highlights some facts about Australian physical and strategic geography that are highly pertinent to any review of the ADF's strategic posture, operational basing, and national support infrastructure.

In regard to naval basing for example, the mainland Australia and Tasmania coast may be some 35,877km long but most of it has few deep-water harbours and even fewer that are large, sheltered, defensible, have immediate access to oceanic deep water and enable naval operations without significant disruption to the maritime commerce that is the major pillar of the Australian economy (and our whole way of life).

Moreover, Port Jackson (which includes Sydney Harbour) provides the only location for a major naval base on Australia's east coast for good reason.

- As a deep-water, drowned river valley (or ria) geologically, its 19km length, 55 square km area and estuary perimeter of 317km enables a major city and commercial port to co-exist with several extensive naval facilities. Its only disadvantages defensively are the harbour bridge (a potential large blockage of harbour facilities west of the bridge if damaged), and a single entrance (although the depth makes it difficult to mine and even more difficult to block).
- Port Jackson has immediate access to oceanic deep water.
- Sydney offers the manufacturing, refining, engineering and service industry support needed for efficient, long-term and economic basing of major fleet units.
- It is not too far south for transits to northern waters (a key operating region), but neither is it too far north for oceanic access routes to be restricted by the Great Barrier Reef.
- It is centrally located for protecting strategic sea-lanes to and from various ports dispersed along the eastern seaboard.
- The nearby and deep-water East Australia Exercise Area (off the NSW south coast) is large by international standards but sufficiently distant from major shipping lanes so maritime commerce is rarely disrupted.

Similarly, Fleet Base West at Garden Island south of Perth offers the only location for a major naval base on the West Coast. On our northern coast, Darwin is the only large, sheltered and defensible harbour with anywhere near the national support

infrastructure required, but putting a major naval base there would mean extensive construction and dredging works.

When looking at the basing and posture of land forces, two-thirds of the combat force is already based in northern Australia at Townsville and Darwin. But the Darwin-based brigade is now migrating some units to Adelaide. This is to lower operational, logistic and personnel costs (up to 60 per cent higher in the north) and allow better access to non-monsoonal training areas. The overall force posture is unaffected by this relocation.

One of the Air Force's three front-line fighter squadrons is based at Tindal in the Northern Territory (south of the tropical cyclone belt) but the other two and the associated training units are logically located near Newcastle, closer to relevant national aerospace infrastructure. Just as relevantly, and as another example of the difference between posture and basing, although no RAAF aircraft are permanently based in Darwin, it remains the second busiest air force base in the country due to transits of all aircraft types, and training and operational deployments by fighter, strike and maritime surveillance aircraft.

Protecting the country's growing dependence on offshore and onshore resource industry facilities across northern Australia does not need ADF units to be collocated with them. The security of the sea-lanes that these bulk-export industries depend on is instead best achieved by an ADF with high and sustainable capacities for strategic mobility and operational manoeuvre. This maximises diplomatic support and deterrence and, if necessary, the ability to apply graduated levels of force, from surveillance and patrol presence up to warfighting.

For a range of strategic, operational, financial, environmental and personnel recruitment and retention reasons, the clear trend over recent decades is to consolidate the ADF on a smaller number of larger and more economical bases with adequate national support and social infrastructure. It is not necessary or appropriate to penny-packet ADF elements around the country as a sop to invalid local fears or pork-barrelling interests.

If Australian governments were really serious about major changes to the force posture of the ADF through dispersal to additional bases, they would create a means of allowing existing base rationalisation free of self-interested political interference. There remain no strategic or operational reasons why expensive single-unit bases such as Cabarlah (near Toowoomba) and Woodside (in the Adelaide Hills) should not be closed as soon as possible — and long-term savings for the taxpayer if they are. •

Making Defence reviews more robust

The composition of the *force* posture review team also highlights a problem with such reviews not including professional expertise on using force (in both senses of the word). The essentially political, rather than truly strategic, gestation perhaps explains why the review team comprises only two former Secretaries of the Department of Defence, rather than the more balanced expertise needed for such a complex strategic study. Even the highly flawed way Australia writes Defence white papers includes some provision for input by professional military expertise.

A similar trend is evident in several recent think-tank studies of defence departmental management, capability development and equipment procurement and sustainment. The intellectual robustness required in such independent studies, and their contestability value in challenging or benchmarking departmental thinking, has obviously suffered from many of their writing teams having insufficient cross-disciplinary expertise.

In particular, both objectivity and public credibility mean no review of a defence matter should exclude military professional expertise among the principal authors. After all, all reviews of Treasury or tax policy include economists and taxation experts.

The Morshead Review in 1957 was the last major review of Defence that was chaired by a (retired) military officer and even then his team comprised two department heads and the chairman of the Public Service Board. If flawed studies by single individuals from Sir Arthur Tange to Paul Dibb to Alan Wrigley to Rufus Black teach us little else, they prove that contestability of opinion and robust conclusions instead need the relevant, truly independent and cross-disciplinary expertise that only comes from a well-balanced, not a narrowly-constituted, review team. •

Developing prime-ministerial talent

Recent and ongoing controversies about party leadership, and the need or not for party renewal — on both sides of politics — have been well covered elsewhere. In general, it is neither the role nor the responsibility of staunchly non-partisan groups such as the ADA to enter such debates. But we do have a role where aspects are relevant to our public-interest watchdog responsibilities for defence and wider national security matters — and for informed public debate about them.

The Westminster-system record in Australia and comparable countries shows that preparation for being prime-minister, or leader of a major party offered as the alternative government, is much enhanced when the aspirant has held ministerial office at some level in at least two of the traditional great offices of state: Treasury, Foreign Affairs and Defence.

Partly this relates to such career preparation usually involving a longer parliamentary career overall. But it specifically produces three particular advantages in offering opportunities for bolstering personal and political maturity and public credibility.

- First, such prime-ministerial (or party leadership) aspirants are exposed to ministerial responsibilities that tend to develop broad vision, rather than simply reinforce ideological or short-term approaches to problem solving and public policy.
- Second, the responsibilities are necessarily strategic rather than tactical in nature and process. They require, if not always get, a long-term and national interest focus well beyond the pressures of day-to-day electoral politics at any given time.
- Third, all three — particularly DFAT and Defence — are or should be more concerned with matters of effective and non-partisan governance in the national interest, rather than imperatives driven by electoral expediency or other partisan political motivations.

Since World War II only three prime-ministers (all Labor), but several major party leaders from both sides of politics, have not held any of these portfolio offices. Bob Hawke is the only one without any such experience who is widely acknowledged on both sides of politics as having been a successful PM.

Before becoming PM, Harold Holt, John Howard and Paul Keating had all been Treasurers and had all been on government and opposition front benches over decades. Gough Whitlam had no opportunity for ministerial office before becoming PM but had been Opposition Leader for six years and, for a time, was both PM and Foreign Minister. Malcolm Fraser had been a Minister for Defence, if not a respected or a successful one.

William McMahon had been a Treasurer, Minister for Foreign Affairs and both a Minister for the Navy and Air (the Air Force). John Gorton (a senator) had been a long-term Minister for the Navy, with most naval historians crediting him with being the most effective Navy minister ever (Alfred Deakin having established the Navy as prime-minister).

Robert Menzies had been a federal and state Attorney-General (and Deputy Premier of Victoria) before his first term as PM. He was a Treasurer, wartime Minister for Defence, wartime Minister for Munitions, and Opposition Leader during both war and peace before becoming PM again. In 1960-61 he was also Minister for Foreign Affairs (then external affairs) whilst PM.

Excluding the effects of the 1949-1972 period in opposition for Labor, the list since World War II of other serious aspirants for party leadership and prime-ministerial office with such portfolio experience includes Richard Casey (Defence Materiel (then called Supply), Treasurer, Foreign Affairs), Paul Hasluck (Defence and Foreign Affairs), Andrew Peacock (Army and Foreign Affairs), Bill Hayden (Treasurer), Kim Beazley (Defence, deputy PM and Opposition Leader) and Brendan Nelson (Defence and Opposition Leader).

The ADA hesitates to comment on the adequacy or not regarding ministerial preparation of more recent prime-ministerial aspirants and office-holders except to note four points — the first general and the rest more specific — but only because noting the facts and concepts involved might aid informed public debate.

- Holding ministerial office in the Defence portfolio in particular, especially when our defence force is committed to fighting wars by the governments such ministers represent, has generally helped such ministers to focus on national interest matters beyond party politics or personal advancement. As Brendan Nelson noted in Parliament after the 2007 election, being the Minister for Defence greatly changes you.
- Since the latter years of the Howard Government both major parties have had several parliamentary leaders. Labor has had Kim Beazley, Simon Crean, Mark Latham, Beazley again, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. The Liberals have had Brendan Nelson, Malcolm Turnbull and Tony Abbott.
- This high turnover in historical terms has necessarily meant shorter terms of party or prime-ministerial office, involved difficult transitions in leadership and aroused controversy as to their respective leadership or prime-ministerial qualities and records.
- Acknowledging the problem of comparisons with perceived past “golden ages”, it seems clear that a marked lack of challenging ministerial (or even shadow spokesperson) experience in the Treasury, Defence and Foreign Affairs portfolios, by most recent leadership aspirants, has contributed detrimentally to the ability of both major parties to develop and temper otherwise well-rounded and therefore long-term leaders. •

Killing myths about Defence ministers

There is a myth in Australian politics that holding the Defence portfolio ends careers rather than furthers them. But even in recent decades Ministers for Defence Malcolm Fraser, Ian Sinclair, Kim Beazley and Brendan Nelson all went on to later lead their parties. Their time in Defence has been widely acknowledged as benefiting their career and unconnected with the ending of their respective leaderships. Even Fraser’s generally unsuccessful time as Minister for Defence did not stop him eventually becoming a three-term PM. The two mundane realities chiefly applying instead are:

- It’s traditional Cabinet seniority, but low political advantage value in buying votes, means Defence has often been allocated to older ministers as their final spot in Cabinet. Just as often this is also their final term in parliament before retirement or anticipated election loss. Fairhall, Fairbairn, Barnard, Killen, Scholes, McLachlan, Moore, Reith and arguably Morrison and Hill, all fit this profile.
- The 1974 integration of the Defence group of departments meant that, until quite recently, one Minister inherited the responsibilities and workloads previously undertaken by five ministers and four statutory boards. Hence the actual or perceived failure of many of them to cope in the portfolio for long — and, consequently, the exponential growth in both departmental bureaucracy and serial dysfunction. •

Stephen Smith: Background to a crisis

How does all this apply to the case of Stephen Smith? He was always likely to face quite invidious comparisons as well as bear the burden of internal party-political difficulties when moving portfolios from Foreign Affairs and Trade to Defence following the November 2010 election.

Although ostensibly enthusiastic, at least in public, Smith really seemed more resigned than interested in shifting to the Defence portfolio. Throughout his political career he had not previously been known for much interest in defence and strategic policy issues (even, perhaps, when Foreign Minister).

His reluctance is understandable, especially when “taking one for the team” in moving aside for Kevin Rudd to return to Cabinet as a former prime-minister. Opinion around caucus and the ministry is that he would have preferred to be Attorney-General and still does. Some also attribute this to perceived lower workloads.

To put his current situation in perspective, Smith has also faced four large problems in both perception and reality.

- First, he followed Senator John Faulkner in the portfolio. His predecessor is widely regarded as having been one of the two most capable Ministers for Defence in living memory ([Defence Brief 141](#), mid-Winter 2010, refers). Smith, or anyone else, was always likely to suffer in comparison.
 - Second, he inherited the dysfunctional structure imposed by the thoroughly bungled reshuffle of ministerial appointments in the Defence portfolio following the November 2010 election. At least as far as Defence goes, this reshuffle placed a high priority on managing factional fixes in the party and the ministry, rather than effective governance of major portfolios in the national interest. Not least by the way it thoughtlessly changed all the portfolio’s ministers and it’s then sole parliamentary secretary. This destroyed continuity in reform efforts and ministerial oversight generally, and broke down the logical structure, and cohesive and integrated team management, of portfolio responsibilities wisely instituted by Faulkner ([Defence Brief 141](#) again refers).
 - Third, the Gillard Government’s precarious minority position in both Houses of Parliament, the new prime-minister’s inexperience in and professed lack of passion for foreign policy and strategic issues, her very difficult relationship with her new Foreign Minister, and obvious tensions between Ministers Rudd and Smith, have all meant that cohesive and consistent higher strategic direction of Defence and related matters has continued to face significant challenges.
 - Finally, the wider political problems besetting the Gillard Government as a whole (or at least community perceptions of them), and the domestic tensions within the Labor Party resulting from the abrupt and seemingly unprecedented transition from Rudd to Gillard, have all added further layers of political management, personality management and machinery-of-government complexity.
- The more recent ministerial reshuffle in late 2011 has made matters worse by again treating ministerial supervision of Defence as an afterthought to the needs of internal party management, political spin and perceived electoral advantage.
- Both junior ministers retain extensive ministerial responsibilities outside the portfolio, even though time and time again this has caused insufficient ministerial supervision of Defence. Warren Snowdon is also Minister for Veterans Affairs, Minister for Indigenous Health and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Centenary of Anzac. Senator Kim Carr was demoted from Cabinet and replaced Jason Clare as the Minister for Defence Materiel, but has retained his existing large portfolio responsibility for manufacturing industry generally

Defence has long suffered, of course, from having the most capable (and usually younger) junior ministers and parliamentary secretaries (Brough, Combet, Clare, etc) tending to move through the Defence portfolio too swiftly — and indeed has often experienced the reverse effect in both competence and longevity.

This latest reshuffle has continued to compound the tragedy of dismantling the logical ministerial team structure instituted by John Faulkner. While Carr has thrown himself into the portfolio, his continuing large responsibility for manufacturing industry nationally poses high risks of pork-barrelling conflicts of interest with his responsibilities for defence force procurement and sustainment. The return of Dr Mike Kelly as a parliamentary secretary in the Defence portfolio was the sole redeeming feature of the latest reshuffle — and indeed implicit confirmation of the prime-ministerial inattention (at best) that underlay the severely bungled reshuffle that unnecessarily moved him in late 2010. ●

Stephen Smith: Hoist on his own petard

Civil-control-of-the-military by parliament exercised through ministers — and the commensurate apoliticism of the defence force in a Westminster-system democracy — are both widely accepted constitutionally and deeply engrained in the institutional culture, professional practices and attitudes of our defence force. Indeed this necessity — and the equally commensurate professional ability to separate personal political beliefs from professional actions — contributes to the frequent ability of ADF officers to spot political bias in public statements or media reporting where many others might fail to detect it.

Clashes occasionally and perhaps inevitably occur however. Particularly when the apoliticism and automatic upwards loyalty involved — and the military's professional focus on defending Australia effectively over the long term — are not understood, appreciated and reciprocated or are abused. This most often occurs where a minister's motivation is or appears unduly politicised in terms of party expediency rather than the national interest or, less often, is driven by personal career ambitions. Inevitably, of course, this ends in one of three ways. Most often the defence force meekly obeys even the worst Minister because the alternative would be worse for the country. Sometimes ministers retire (including losing an election). At other times prime-ministers recognise the danger and move the errant minister to a political portfolio or out of the ministry.

Since early in Stephen Smith's tenure as Minister for Defence, Australia has been slow-marching towards a minor constitutional and institutional crisis. This is not due to the ADF somehow "disobeying civil-control-of-the-military" or "resisting reform" as political spin or superficial media analysis might describe it. It is actually due to the exact opposite (as [Defence Brief 144](#) discusses).

The problem has persisted primarily because the statutory leadership of the defence force has had to insist, to the Minister, that he exercise civil-control-of-the-military properly and lawfully. It has also been exacerbated by the minority government situation, and leadership stresses within the Labor parliamentary party, distracting the prime-minister from due attention to fixing the problem by counselling, reprimanding or moving Smith.

But how could this occur relatively un-noticed publicly? Both generally, and in politics and the media specifically, few Australians now have any personal or even extended-family experience of our defence force or what war involves. Public and individual misunderstandings about defence force matters therefore occur much more often as most Australians no longer "get" their defence force or even realise they do not and should.

Only 19 of the 226 MHRs and senators, for example, have served in any part of the ADF, including only three in the ministry (Joe Ludwig, Bill Shorten, Kelly), one shadow minister (Stuart Robert), only eight with experience in the regular forces and only five with service anywhere in the ADF since 2000. ●

Stephen Smith: A study in failure?

As first recounted and discussed in *Defence Brief* back in [June 2011](#), the ADA considers Minister Smith has continued to put his personal party leadership ambitions ahead of proper ministerial supervision of Australia's defence efforts. Using spurious excuses, he is also postponing most pressing strategic and capability development decisions until dates so far in the future that he is unlikely to still be Minister. The ADA considers the most likely explanation for this sustained pattern of indecision is to avoid his party leadership chances being affected if decisions required now attract future criticism.

The ADA considers Minister Smith has regularly scapegoated defence force personnel publicly when they are not responsible for the situations criticised by him and others (such as the former Chief-of-Navy in early 2010 about the state of the amphibious fleet largely maintained by the DMO since 2005), or when doing their professional duty (such as the Commandant of ADFA). His unreasonably long delay in appointing the new CDF and Service Chiefs last year, and his apparent attempt to block General Hurley's appointment as CDF, were simply exercises in petty revenge for the ADF leadership's principled insistence that he exercise civil-control-of-the-military properly.

Minister Smith clearly and deliberately neglects his ministerial and moral duty to defend defence force personnel individually, or the ADF collectively, from inaccurate, unfair or misdirected criticism — particularly when it is not permitted to answer such media and other criticisms itself. Again one could reasonably conclude that this has often seemed for no apparent reason other than his personal political advantage.

By insisting on the suspension of the ADFA Commandant without due cause, contrary to the principles of natural justice, the ADA believes he has abused his statutory power and moral authority as Minister. This has been compounded by his refusal to allow release of the independent report by Andrew Kirkham, QC, into last year's incident at ADFA, which we understand, effectively exonerates the commandant and his staff. Minister Smith is continuing to abuse his authority and failing to meet accepted community standards of fair play and common decency.

By his earlier attempt to interfere in an unrelated defence force disciplinary proceeding, the ADA considers Minister Smith has shown contempt for the principle of the separation of powers between executive and judicial or quasi-judicial functions.

Some of our best prime-ministers on both sides of politics have previously held one or more of the Treasury, Foreign Affairs or Defence portfolios but it is a false syllogism to believe that anyone with such experience would automatically make a good prime-minister. Indeed such portfolios have also proven equally useful in exposing inadequate performance among leadership contenders. In other cases, such as William McMahon, he is regarded as doing well in these portfolios but not as PM.

The ADA is staunchly non-partisan and naturally hesitates to comment on internal party political matters, particularly during a highly contested leadership dispute. But, as an independent public-interest watchdog, it would also be improper at this juncture to not draw public attention to Stephen Smith's behaviour and troubling performance as Minister for Defence. ●

Irony Corner:

In late 2010 the ADA noted in [Defence Brief 142](#) the unhappy 1971 precedent with John Gorton being deposed as PM and then appointed to the Defence portfolio. We also pondered whether Kevin Rudd, as a man with demonstrated and pronounced micro-managerial tendencies, was suitably equipped to be Minister for Defence. Given what Defence and the defence force have subsequently learned from Stephen Smith instead, the ADA wishes to apologise to Mr Rudd. ●