



2020 hindsight spots obvious flaws

One of the ten weekend workshops at the 2020 summit was tasked with discussing Australia's future security and prosperity. As a giant brainstorming session it bore out the many advantages and pitfalls of such activities.

A major handicap was the selection of participants. The rationale remains somewhat unclear and obviously concentrated on the prosperity aspect of the topic. Excluding the Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Defence Personnel, the CDF and the Secretaries of Defence and DFAT, only four others appear to have had any serious national security credentials. These included a former CDF and three academics with significant national security expertise (two of them also former ADF officers). Among the general participants only two more are well known for a serious long-term interest in defence issues and there was one junior defence industry journalist.

A further four participants had serious expertise in the domestic security arena, including a state police commissioner, a former senior ASIO officer, a former senior AFP officer (also with some military experience) and one academic with some specialisation in counter-terrorism. Another academic had some national security-related legal expertise.

The group's report reflects the eclectic composition of the overall group, the short consideration times involved and the limitation of only 15 or so of the 96 actually having much knowledge or an informed appreciation of Australia's defence and strategic challenges.

A measured approach to national security was also compromised by insufficient consideration of *hard power* themes relative to *soft power* ones. Much of the unbalanced discussion on the latter also reflected 1980s-era ideas (and emotions) long since disproven or modified by international practice over the last 15-20 years.

If you can wade through the waffle the final report has much worth reading. Hopefully a more balanced and realistic approach, however, will be taken to any aspects spilling over into the 2008 Defence White Paper process, including public consultations with the 21 million Australians not able to contribute to the 2020 Summit. ●

Highlights:

- 2020 summit ducks challenges of future defence
- Public discussion paper for Defence White Paper consultation process earns a 'C minus'
- Why there are really not more women in senior ADF ranks just yet
- Women serving in frontline units throughout the ADF are insulted by claims they do not exist
- Tania Zaetta: Who was really responsible for junking her reputation and why?
- Irony Corner: Former deputy secretaries in Defence allege shambles in defence policy

White Paper consultation difficulties

Some 2020 Summit thinking will obviously flow into the public consultation process for the 2008 Defence White Paper. The team put together to lead these consultations appears to be a good one and the program of public meetings (early July to mid September) has been well thought through.

A public discussion paper has been promulgated as a basis for the consultations and can be downloaded from <http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/discusspaper.htm>.

The paper is a serviceable attempt at summarising complex issues but too often errs on the side of simplicity rather than accuracy and clarity. And to the extent where it has to be asked whether it was sufficiently (or even actually) proof-read. One particularly serious error is where the concept and practice of collective defence (military alliances by *some* states for their common defence against an aggressor) is wrongly described throughout as collective security – which is actually the principle of concerted action by *all* states in a *universal* organisation (as in the UN) to preserve peace by *every* member acting against any one aggressor. This might at first seem a minor point to some. But surely no-one incapable of understanding this important distinction should be involved in the writing or other development of a Government white paper on defence or foreign affairs.

The paper's terminology also evokes nostalgia at times, especially in its frequent use of the 1960s term *armed forces* instead of *defence force*. Its historical background to Australia's enduring defence challenges is also summarised to the point of over-simplification, and is well below the standard set by the various ADF capstone doctrine publications. Readers may be surprised to find, for example, no mention of our naval forces in the sections on the colonial era and even for World War I. Or puzzled that in World War II we had 34,000 killed in action (actually 16,820) – even deaths in the ADF from all causes anywhere in the world only totalled 30,289.

The annex listing ADF capabilities is particularly poorly structured. It contains numerous factual errors and unfortunately fails to distinguish between capabilities we have now, capabilities we are developing, and capabilities which are maintained by reservists rather than full-time personnel. It also does not use a standard method to describe the capabilities of each Service, does not address joint capabilities, lacks basic explanatory detail and is too platform-centric in its approach.

Readers will be surprised to learn, for example, that the Army currently has eight infantry battalions (actually five and a half) plus 4RAR and is *fully* equipped with 22 *attack* (rather than *armed reconnaissance*) helicopters. They will no doubt be somewhat astonished to read that the Army also has 257 *armoured infantry fighting vehicles* (actually none) and still operates 25 Iroquois utility helicopters (the last one was retired in November 2007). Meanwhile, in the list of Air Force capabilities, a whole squadron of Orions has been lost. ●

Time not favouritism best solves gender imbalances in ADF

The reason there are few senior ADF officers who are female is because they have not got there yet – not because they are somehow unfairly barred from reaching high rank by structures or culture. Recent statements attributed to the Minister for Defence, and the Minister Assisting, on the subject of female career progression in the defence force seem to have overlooked this important distinction.

It is also well worth noting that when the ADF last fast-tracked the promotion of female officers in the mid 1990s the experiment did not end well. It was not fair to the officers so advanced because most lacked the background and credibility needed to succeed. The integrity and equity of the overall promotion system also suffered because the fast-tracking unfairly discriminated against male peers with sounder claims to promotion.

The exceptions from that era, however, prove the two fundamental points concerned about time and through-career competitiveness. The female officers reaching the highest ranks on merit up to now tend to have come from career specialisations where most or all positions at each rank have been effectively gender-neutral for decades. Logistics, intelligence, communications and the health services feature strongly in this regard.

Since the early to mid 1990s the range of specialisations becoming gender-neutral on a through-career basis has increased markedly – including operational ones. The junior female officers entering the ADF over the last 15 years have usually been able to compete fairly with their male peers throughout their careers. This is especially the case in the Navy, and to a lesser extent the Air Force, than the Army. This cohort group are now mid to senior lieutenant colonel equivalents and include the captain of a frigate and the commanding officer of the C-17 squadron. That there are not more of them is only the product of the limited numbers of females who entered the ADF in the early to mid 1990s – and the winnowing that occurs in all professions when some women choose to forsake career progression for family or other reasons.

Purely through genuine achievement there will be many more senior ADF officers who are female over the next decade. The political itch to fiddle would set this natural progression backwards again and should not be scratched. We should let time alone heal any remaining minor ills and let it do so fairly and efficiently. ●

Combatting ignorance

Discussion on the related subject of women in combat has also again caused confusion and offence, especially where public comments wrongly state or imply that female defence force members are not currently serving in frontline situations. Recent ambiguous statements attributed to Ministers, ill-informed claims by various public commentators, academics and single-issue activists, and sloppy media reporting, have all contributed to the problem.

A few clear principles and facts always need to be faced on this topic. First, operational capability must be the prime determinant of employment policy in the defence force because it involves sending young Australians to fight together in top-grade teams on the

battlefield. This should not be difficult to grasp. After all, we insist on prowess at sport, rather than gender, being the criteria when we select and send young Australians to play in top-grade teams on the sporting field.

Second, women are already serving in frontline roles across the ADF. They help crew all vessels in the Navy and can fly in all aircraft in the Air Force. In the Army they can serve in and alongside all frontline units – with the only limitations applying to permanent employment in the actual ‘teeth’ sub-units of some units. These limitations are essentially based on OH&S aspects unique to war, especially the need to minimise unnecessary casualties and other operational risks among both men and women.

Third, any proposal to modify this policy requires calm and measured public debate, using facts and critical judgement. Given the potential for controversy if disproportionate numbers of women were likely to become battle casualties – through having to fight enemy men one-on-one, continually, day in and day out – the electorate at large also probably has strong views.

Fourth, the current policy and its underlying logic meets with overwhelming approval among the women serving in the ADF because they understand the issues involved.

Fifth, Australia is a world leader in the employment of women in its defence force. An important reason for this is because we listen to the women involved – and because practicality not ideology drives our policy and any experimentation in this regard.

Finally, it is no small irony that most of those calling for women to serve in all defence force roles tend to be those with no ADF experience themselves, and often seem to be those likely to oppose their own children of either gender ever serving in the defence force. ●

Many lessons in Zaetta case

Ms Tania Zaetta has had her dignity and privacy seriously violated for no public benefit. Not a shred of proof has been found to back the allegations up. Moreover, what adult Australians do legally and in private would be their business anyway.

There has also been much hypocritical media pontificating about the Department of Defence being to blame. But the adverse publicity affecting Ms Zaetta has mainly resulted from irresponsible media reporting and speculation. If various media organs had not covered this matter, and with such relish, then no damage to Ms Zaetta’s reputation would have occurred.

The Department of Defence was, however, not blameless. It should not have mentioned Ms Zaetta by name, should not have briefed the Minister on the supposed issue without first consulting with her so she could properly refute the allegations, and should not have circulated the “hot issues” brief concerned to 96 initial addressees – and by email.

Those arguing for a tort of privacy have another significant example of media irresponsibility to bolster their case. ●

Irony corner

Former deputy secretaries in the Department of Defence, Paul Dibb (1988-91) and Richard Brabin-Smith (2001-02), posited that ‘by the later years of the Howard Government, defence policy had become a shambles’. ●