



Towards a truly monochrome white paper

For most of this year the biggest intellectual, professional and indeed moral responsibility faced in the preparation of the new defence White Paper has been in making sure there is not too much white in it again. And that it is a robust assessment of our likely strategic circumstances over the next 20-30 years not, as with previous White Papers, mainly an exercise to try and excuse inadequate investment in our common defence.

Fresh strategic thinking on the regional aspects of our defence has clearly been needed since the 1999 East Timor crisis, where previous policy, especially defence-of-Australia (DOA) obsessions, almost resulted in us suffering a major strategic humiliation and perhaps even a bloody tactical defeat. Subsequent events globally since the 9/11, Bali and Jakarta attacks have continued to demolish the nostrums long used by those arguing the DOA view of the world and our place in it.

A political problem for the Rudd government, of course, is that the mainly incremental reforms in Australian strategic policy (and defence capability and procurement planning) over the last nine years or so largely occurred under the Howard government. This is, however, actually of little real relevance in the greater scheme of things because most of these developments would probably have had to occur under any government.

The reforms of the last nine years were largely driven by events. Moreover, the resultant strategic policy, capability development and equipment procurement decisions have generally been based on impartial professional advice from the ADF and the Public Service (and objective academics). The speed at which many were implemented might have been quickened somewhat by the importance a dominant prime-minister placed on them (for both genuine strategic reasons and, perhaps, in the quest for political wedges). But again there is likely to be more continuity than discontinuity in this regard under the current government.

The Rudd government is naturally keen to put its own stamp on strategic policy and defence issues. Notwithstanding a tendency for the Minister for Defence, Joel Fitzgibbon, to kick any odd political head when he sees it, the government as a whole appears to be resisting the temptation to throw out the strategic baby with the DOA bathwater and other slops.

The ongoing global economic crisis and the recent election of Barack Obama to the US presidency have obviously complicated matters somewhat. But the long-term fundamentals of our strategic situation and consequent options remain largely unchanged.

The 15-25 year defence capability development cycle actually allows considerable flexibility for coping with a global recession likely to be of much shorter duration. It also provides a highly effective avenue for stimulatory spending, not least because defence capability is such an important and enduring aspect of national infrastructure. ●

Highlights:

- Will it be a proper White Paper or just another excuse?
- Is Kevin Rudd driving real strategic policy reform?
- Mortimer Review is a symptom not part of a cure
- Minister Fitzgibbon loses a Chief-of-Staff
- Apt illustration of the cost of caring for war veterans
- Irony Corner: More Japanese denial about World War II

Does Kevin Rudd really understand the need for change and the changes needed?

Based on his longer public comments on defence matters, Kevin Rudd appears to have rejected both the Beazley and Keating-Latham views of Australian strategic policy, although party loyalty naturally prevents him from explaining this explicitly.

Kim Beazley pursued his academic interests in defence and was later Minister for Defence during the Cold War. The theories he has advocated, largely unchanged, since then have grown increasingly out of date in both principle and practice over the last 20 years. Their long, but essentially ever-limiting, influence on Labor defence policy was due to the respect held by many in the party for Beazley on defence issues (even when they disagreed about other matters). Fortunately this effect seems to be dissipating quickly with his retirement from parliament.

The Keating-Latham view is clearly ahistoric despite the rhetorical fervour of its key proponents sometimes obscuring the lack of supporting facts and its many other contradictions. The ideological emotion and often isolationist impulses it embodies reflect a fading tribal view of the world and Australian history.

As a former diplomat, a genuine internationalist and somewhat of a factional loner, Kevin Rudd seems more inclined to adopt a first principles approach. In describing our future strategic challenges as Prime Minister, Rudd has thus far clearly articulated concepts that are anathema to DOA theorists and their groupies in academia, parts of defence industry and the media.

In particular, he has emphasised the need for an *integrated and balanced* defence force with some ability to *control*, not just *deny*, the seas around Australia and in the region. He has also noted that the ADF must have serious and integrated abilities to defend and support our national interests as well as our territory.

These comments reflect a coherent strategic vision for the future. They indicate a break with the sort of ideological, politically opportunist or Service-centric thinking that has so handicapped our defence planning under governments of both political persuasions for the last 40 years. They also appear to be the result of white paper deliberations to date.

Now if the intellectual battle to rejuvenate Australian strategic policy after the DOA doldrums is truly won, the Rudd government just has to fund and risk-manage this reforming vision coherently. They must resist any reversion to short-term political opportunism – such as the cuts applied to defence investment in the 2008 budget (in clear dereliction of major election promises). Neither can they surrender to the temptation to let the funding thought to be available politically drive strategic policy. The strategy Australia needs must instead drive the national resources to be allocated and the risk management measures to be adopted where resourcing cannot be provided.

Under both Labor and conservative governments the dollar-driven approach was used throughout the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in the 1987, 1994 and 2000 defence White Papers and in the infamous 1991 Force Structure Review (FSR). For a generation or more this approach has caused serious damage to the ADF and unduly constrained our strategic options. The last of the disastrous ill-effects of the 1991 FSR cutbacks in personnel and capabilities, for example, will not be reversed under current capability development plans until 2012. ●

Real lesson of the Mortimer review

The report of the *Defence Procurement and Sustainment Review* by Mr John Mortimer makes 46 recommendations. These were a mix of the obvious, the worth trying, the unsupported in the body of the report and the plain unworkable. Oddly, the report mostly ignored that for good or ill the Department of Defence is (uniquely) led by a diarchy not just a departmental secretary. This was probably the cause of the report thoroughly misunderstanding the statutory and practical responsibilities of the CDF and Service Chiefs for capability development and operations in the broadest sense – including the specification, integration and sustainment of weapons and equipment used by the ADF as a whole.

The recommendation that the Defence Materiel Organisation (DMO) be constituted as an executive agency has apparently been rightly rejected by the government. Those with knowledge of the Hawke-era Department of Defence Support will easily understand why. As will those with a good grasp of governmental finance and personnel policies and processes as they can now be practised under modern legislation.

A key difficulty with the review was that David Mortimer was not sufficiently independent, being a member of the Defence Procurement Advisory Board. This is unfortunately not without significant precedent in Defence, itself a creature of a 1973 'study' undertaken alone by an idiosyncratic and ruthless Secretary of the department unwisely given unfettered power to rebuild its structure and soul in his own image.

Another major difficulty with the Mortimer review was that its quest for greater 'commercial' practices concentrated on trying to harmonise bureaucratic and financial responsibilities in peacetime, even at the cost of complicating the CDF's command of the ADF in both peace and war.

The Department of Defence and the DMO primarily exist to support the ADF not vice versa. The Australian Government must have useable and relevant defence force capability at its disposal when needed. Consequently, the prime output of our defence efforts is the development and maintenance of such capability, not marginal endeavours or quasi-outputs such as 'policy', 'paper' or 'financial efficiency'.

Saving money, rationalising bureaucratic processes or introducing a more commercial approach to procurement functions are not ends in themselves where the defence force is concerned. This is particularly so if they would come at the price of greater strategic and operational risks, flawed command structures, increased casualties, potential strategic humiliation or actual military defeat. We should not forget why Australia maintains a defence force. Nor why the operational efficiency alone of that force must always remain the over-riding principle in how it is controlled by Ministers, how it is employed by the Government to execute national resolve, and how it is commanded, structured, equipped, supported and financed.

The whole Mortimer Review episode once again emphasises a fundamental conclusion about how Australia disorganises its defence. Every 2-3 years since 1981 we have had a major review of departmental structure or its major components and functions. The real question to be asked, however, is why such constant reviews have been necessary and why the recommendations implemented have consistently met with such enduring failure and often complete reversal after only a few years?

What is really needed instead is a truly independent review of the whole structure, based on first principles. This would examine why such constant reviews have occurred and why the underlying causes of them keep reoccurring. Further treating of the symptoms and not the disease is not the way to find and implement the cures needed. ●

Movement at the station

The recent departure of the Chief-of-Staff to the Minister for Defence, Daniel Cotterill, has puzzled long-term observers of the relationships between ministers and the Department of Defence. Contrary to the story apparently leaked to the media by the Minister's office, Cotterill was respected professionally and enjoyed good inter-personal relationships with senior ADF officers and departmental officials.

Previously one of the more able defence industry journalists, Cotterill joined the Labor defence team in opposition in early 2007 when few appeared keen to work as opposition staffers. Joel Fitzgibbon was then the newly appointed shadow minister and came to the job with no background or previous interest in defence issues. Cotterill's advice did much to restore credibility to Labor's day-to-day commentary on defence issues over the year preceding the last election – and in assisting Joel Fitzgibbon gain confidence in a new and wholly unfamiliar portfolio area.

Defence is a different type of portfolio to most others in that the Minister is responsible for the welfare of real people and for actual life and death matters. It is more than just desirable that any Minister for Defence have at least some serious defence expertise in his office, rather than staff chosen purely for their political or personal loyalties to the Minister and the governing party. This was, after all, a serious constraint on the exercise of ministerial supervision under the last Minister for Defence. ●

Crafty reminder of great skill

Parliament House is currently hosting an exhibition entitled *Pe-aced with love: An exhibition of story quilts by war veteran families*. Each quilt tells a story focused on individual, family, Australian locality or military sub-unit experiences of war. The general theme depicted is twofold: the struggle of many war veterans to cope with the after-effects of war (including what the war has meant for them) long after our military commitment to that conflict has ended; and telling of the struggles by their carers, relations and friends in looking after them over subsequent decades.

The quilts come from the inter-generational quilt project launched in 2003 by the Partners of Veterans Association of Australia (www.pva.org.au). Their display in Parliament House was organised by the Hon Graham Edwards, former MP for Cowan in Western Australia and the only war veteran in the previous parliament.

Hopefully all ministers, parliamentarians and their staffs will take the opportunity to view the exhibition and then think deeply about it. These are not disembodied bureaucratic accounts or policy statements written without direct contact with those involved. The quilts and their catalogue explanations bring home our frequent neglect of war veterans and their families – and how many Australians are still paying the cost of war, on a deeply personal basis, long after most Australians have forgotten about that war and those who were involved in it on our behalf. ●

Irony corner

General Toshio Tamogami, the commander of the Japanese Air Self-Defence Force, has written an essay entitled *A True Perspective of Modern History*. Among other things, this denied Japanese aggression across Asia as a cause of World War II and claimed instead that Japan had been tricked into war by the USA. He has rightly been sacked from his command and his Service – but by the Japanese Prime Minister, Taro Aso, a noted denier of Japanese atrocities in World War II. Aso is also scion of a prominent business and political family which heavily exploited slave labour in its Japanese mines by allied Prisoners-of-War, and civilians from countries conquered by Japan, during the war. ●