

INQUIRY INTO THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF A BIPARTISAN AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE AGREEMENT

The Problems of Community Understanding

James Goldrick

The Committee is right to seek a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement, but its aim should be more ambitious than that. The country needs what should effectively be a *nonpartisan* agreement for and about national defence, but this cannot happen until we increase the level of community understanding.

The key challenge we face in developing coherent and effective national security policy may derive from a combination of our evolving demography and generational change. The current consensus on defence, so far as it exists, is largely based on a common understanding of our national interests, of shared values and of our national history. The problem is that many new arrivals in Australia come with a wholly different understanding of security and defence, an understanding sometimes antithetical to many of the judgements on which our own policies have long been based. Furthermore, the terrible experiences of many of our immigrants in their own lands inevitably colour their views about security and the military. This is not to say that different cultures and different historical narratives will not bring new dimensions and more sophistication to our national policy making. They should and will, but at least some hostility to Australia's current alliance arrangements and its approach to global military and security commitments is based on the assembly of very different 'facts' and preconceptions than we can accept, while it is vital that all Australians recognise and value our possession of a professional and apolitical defence force and equally professional and apolitical security agencies.

The passage of time since the Second World War means, despite the continuing efforts at remembrance, that younger Australians are increasingly hazy about the background to the major conflicts of the last century. Too much of what they do know is closer to mythology than history and their understanding has not been helped by the legends – many of which are false - that surround both Gallipoli and the fall of Singapore. The complexities of the last twenty years have also created significant concerns amongst many younger people as to the direction of Australian security policy, concerns that sometimes do not fully comprehend the threats which we face. The current efforts to reinvigorate the national shipbuilding industry and encourage defence industry also need to be carefully explained.

We thus must find better ways of engaging and involving the community in the defence debate both as a whole and within its components. This may not be easy. For example, the public consultation process for the 2016 White Paper did not involve ethnic communities to the extent that it should – one reason being that it proved more difficult to organise engagement with many of those communities than had been expected.

An important part of the community engagement effort must be the work of the ADF. A real national thirst for a greater presence and greater visibility of uniformed personnel became apparent during the White Paper consultations and was probably the point most often and most consistently raised in the process. Resources must be found to allow a more extensive and sophisticated engagement than the welcome, but largely decorative presence of ADF personnel at major public events and ceremonies. Middle rank and senior personnel – and public servants - must also be given more room to act as the voice of the ADF and Defence in explaining both what the ADF and Defence do and why they do it. This should not be considered a license to comment on policy, but encouragement to explain what is often seen by much of the public as arcane and incomprehensible. Other agencies such

as the Australian Border Force should also be encouraged to engage with the community about their work.

We must also do more to educate young Australians, especially first- and second-generation Australians, about our strategic culture and security imperatives in a way that goes well beyond ideas of ANZAC. This should be aimed at achieving an understanding of why this country has been involved in conflict and just how decisions about national security have been made – good and bad. It must create an understanding of Australia's place in the world, its vital interests and our strategic challenges. We need specifically to target those from ethnic communities and less advantaged backgrounds who do not have the same ease of access to the national security establishment that others may. Such a programme will not only have important educational results in its own right, but may also assist in widening the pool of potential entrants to national security agencies, entrants who will bring with them fresh perspectives, cultural diversity and language skills.

Recommendations

My specific recommendations are:

- a. Encourage Defence and other agencies to develop a more comprehensive public 'explanation' effort across the nation that will allow ADF and Australian Border Force personnel and APS members to engage more effectively with the community to explain what Defence and the other security organisations do and why. As a priority, this should include secondary schools and tertiary institutions – and not only those universities and colleges which have existing security studies programmes.
- b. Examine the potential for a programme to engage specifically with ethnic communities on defence matters that involves parliamentarians, military personnel, national security agency public servants and members of industry. There may be scope for the lion's share of this work to be undertaken by 'grey beards' – former MPs, retired ADF officers and APS members and former defence industry personnel with the appropriate credentials, but it will need the endorsement and almost certainly some 'door opening' by serving parliamentarians to achieve the required penetration of local communities.
- c. Set up a trial Year 11 national programme under the auspices of the National Security College at the ANU for an immersion experience in Canberra. This should include briefings by senior – and junior – members of the relevant agencies, as well as opportunities to examine and 'game' strategic problems. The programme should be initially targeted at young people from ethnic communities, particularly those considering going on to tertiary education. The programme can be enlarged and extended based on the experience of the trial.

About the Author:

Rear Admiral James Goldrick AO, CSC, RAN (Retired) commanded HMA Ships *Cessnock* and *Sydney* (twice), the Australian Surface Task Group and the multinational maritime interception force in the Persian Gulf in 2002 and Australia's inter-agency Border Protection Command in 2006-2008. Other commands included the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) (twice), and the Australian Defence College. He is an Adjunct Professor at UNSW@Canberra (ADFA) and in SDSC at ANU, as well as a Professorial Fellow at ANCORS at the University of Wollongong. He was a visiting fellow at All Souls College, Oxford University in 2015. He is a member of the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal and of the Defence Force Remuneration Tribunal. He was a member of the Expert Panel supporting the development of the 2016 Australian Defence White Paper. He was awarded a Doctorate of Letters (honoris causa) by the University of NSW in 2006. His books include: *No Easy Answers: The Development of the Navies of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka* and *Before Jutland: The Naval War in Northern European Waters August 1914-February 1915*, and, with Jack McCaffrie, *Navies of South-East Asia: A Comparative Study. After Jutland: The Naval War in Northern European Waters June 1916-November 1918* will be published in 2018. *Before Jutland* won the Anderson Medal of the Society for Nautical Research for the best work of naval or maritime history published in 2015.

Contact Details: