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Introduction

This is my first formal speech on defence matters outside the Parliament since becoming Labor's spokesman on Defence. I'm very pleased to have been given the opportunity to deliver it here today as part of your National Security and Defence Series.

The occasion provides me with an opportunity to spell-out the Opposition's views on a range of defence and defence related issues.

Of course, the primary responsibility for any Australian government is to secure the country, defend its people and protect our national interests. To fulfil that responsibility Labor is committed to a strong, versatile and balanced Australian Defence Force.

The foundation of Labor's defence policy is the principle of self-reliance. We believe that the Australian Defence Force must be able to defend Australia and its interests without relying on the combat forces of other nation-states. Self-reliance reflects Australia's sense of itself as an independent nation.

Fundamental to self reliance is the ability to control the sea and air approaches to our country. In the modern world that means our defence force must be able to deploy leading edge air and maritime capabilities.

For a middle power such as Australia, with a limited amount of money available to spend on defence, that requirement means making some tough choices on the structure of our ADF.

It is absolutely vital that high level strategic guidance feeds into a coherent framework which results in an appropriate force structure that is sustainable within the available budget.

Security and Stability within Our Immediate Region

Many of the same military capabilities required to control our sea and air approaches also allow Australia to contribute to the security and stability of our region. The security challenges which arise within our own region will be those over which Australia has the least discretion. That means we must be in the best possible position to deal with any such contingencies.

In an increasingly interdependent world, security cannot be achieved without effective international relationships – bilateral, regional and multilateral.

It also requires a willingness to play our part in coalition efforts in far away lands in defence of collective interests.

When it comes to the defence of our country and its national interests, Australia has no greater friend than the United States of America.

This close and long standing alliance between our two peoples is, and will remain, at the heart of Australia's defence posture.

Also of great significance is the range of friendly relationships we enjoy in Asia. In particular, the Five Power Defence Agreement and our ongoing friendship with our near neighbours Indonesia. A relationship most recently reinforced by the signing of the Framework for Security Cooperation Agreement in November last year.

Need for New White Paper

But it is of some concern that Australia's current defence posture is based on a White Paper developed in the late 90s and released in the year 2000. Of course, much has happened in the world during the past seven years – the least not being 9/11.

It's past time for a full and detailed reassessment of Australia's strategic circumstances.

The strategic updates of 2003 and 2005 have done little to genuinely enhance the high level guidance available to the Department of Defence.

The 2005 Update is little more than an "information paper with little strategic policy guidance" – Paul Dibb's words, not mine!

We need to be thinking 10, 20 and 30 years into the future.

Anticipating threats. Thinking about the new paradigm presented by the rise of non-state threats and evolving changes in the global distribution of power made most obvious by the rise and rise of China and India.

Of course, strategic assessments used as a basis for national defence policy have long term ramifications and we must utilise the most up-to-date intelligence in order to make rational assumptions.

Without the guidance of a new White Paper, developments in force structure and the subsequent acquisition of the necessary military capabilities have become ad hoc rather than strategic.

Of course, we've seen too many adverse consequences of that in recent years.

Force Structure

The need for versatility is a central theme of force structure for the ADF. High-end war fighting capabilities are very expensive and usually take a long time to acquire and bring in to operation.

While it is essential to maintain the capabilities necessary to guarantee the security of Australia's air and maritime approaches, that requirement must be balanced against the need for a range of other capabilities.

The role of the Australian Army in defending the nation and its interests cannot be underestimated. And having available sufficient numbers of well armed, trained and protected soldiers is critical to operational success.

The range of potential operational uses for the ADF ranges from aid, to the civil power, to high intensity combat.

Notwithstanding the need to be prepared for high-end war fighting tasks, the ADF must also be ready for the range of tasks that it is much more likely to be called upon to perform.

Contributions to UN sanctioned regional peacemaking and peacekeeping operations mean that Australia must be well placed to provide a range of capabilities.

And it's important to remember that soldiers trained and equipped for war fighting can more easily be turned in to peace keepers than the other way around.

Budget

Of course, all of this takes money – substantial amounts of it!

Australia's current expenditure on Defence is almost \$20 billion. Most Australians would no doubt think that's a lot but at just below 2% of GDP it certainly doesn't represent the peak in our spend.

In the 1967/68 financial year when we were still active in Vietnam, we were spending 4.2% of GDP.

And while the current tempo of the ADF has not reached Vietnam War proportions it is nonetheless, very high. And will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

Maintaining funding at 2% of GDP may or may not be enough. But one thing is certain; we cannot afford to waste a cent of it.

Every defence dollar wasted is a dollar not spent on the crucial task of defending Australia and its interests.

We've seen far too many examples lately of cost blow-outs and "ad hoc spending" – Hugh White's words, not mine.

Given the funding constraints, it is as important now than at any other time since Federation, that money allocated to the Defence Budget is spent effectively and efficiently.

Ad hoc and expensive military capability acquisitions entered into without rigorous strategic capability planning by the Howard government have resulted in a capital spend blow-out of at least \$10 billion.

And a \$5 billion gap has opened up in the cost of operating the ADF's acquisitions. Not my figure, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Mark Thomson's figure.

Acquisition

Managing large and complex military acquisition projects is clearly a major challenge. Leading edge military technology of the type necessary to maintain Australia's regional edge is difficult to deliver on time and on budget.

Despite the best efforts of the Defence Materiel Organisation, and I acknowledge the efforts of those involved in reforming that organisation, the terms “software integration” and “combat system” can still send a shiver down the spine of any observer of the Budget bottom line.

If Australia is to acquire the necessary military capabilities within the available budget, then the capability development and project management processes will have to be further improved.

Better delivery against schedule, budget and meeting capability requirements, should be an absolute prerequisite before the Australian people are asked to invest any extra money in Defence equipment.

Government, Defence and defence industry all have a role to play in making sure that the ADF receives the equipment it needs, when it needs it.

Rather than inflict yet another review on Defence or the DMO, a Labor Government will concentrate on following through on the reform processes that have already begun. Albeit in a more disciplined and coordinated fashion than we’ve seen of late.

Certainly, you won’t see a Labor Government putting its own interests ahead of the national interest.

“Political interference in the capital acquisitions program has resulted in an increasing number of questionable capability development decisions”, Des Ball’s words, not mine.

Personnel

Of course, no matter how well funded or equipped, Australia’s Defence Force can be no better than the men and women that serve within it. The Service Chiefs all acknowledge that recruiting and retaining sufficient top quality personnel is their major challenge and Labor agrees with them.

While there are no easy answers to the recruiting and retention dilemma, a consistent, innovative and well directed effort will achieve results over time. To streamline the recruiting process and allow the effective implementation of a range of personnel measures a Labor Government would appoint an ADF recruiting supremo.

One person rather than a broad range of people and committees will be in charge and accountable for the progress of recruiting and retention for the Australian Defence Force.

There is simply no point at throwing taxpayers' money at further advertising when the structure underlying the recruiting system is much less effective than it needs to be.

Retaining experienced ADF personnel is crucial if Defence's workforce requirements are to be adequately met, and true value gained for the taxpayers' investment in training.

An effective defence force is not just about numbers. It's also about retaining the experience, technical skills and corporate knowledge essential for operational success.

Attractive and equitable terms and conditions of employment for Defence personnel are essential as is support for ADF personnel and their families.

While their work is very different in many ways, ADF members are no different to other workers. Being appreciated is an important part of job satisfaction. They like to know that others believe they are doing a good job, that their efforts are worthwhile, and that they are appreciated.

Support for Troops Serving Overseas

Continuing that theme, I think it important to conclude with a message of unqualified support for those brave men and women of the ADF who are currently serving overseas, and to acknowledge the sacrifice of their families and the efforts of those working to support them.

It is no secret that Labor has vigorously questioned the Government's judgement with respect to the involvement of Australian troops in the Iraq war. Let me make it perfectly clear that that criticism does not imply, and should never be misrepresented in order to imply, that the criticism extends to the men and women of the ADF who are doing such wonderful work in Iraq in difficult circumstances.

In fact, Labor joins with the vast majority of Australians who are immensely proud of our defence force and the service men and women who are doing such a marvellous job in serving their country.

Let me finish by saying that, if elected, a Labor government will work tirelessly to ensure that our ADF personnel are properly supported by a Defence policy, force structure, and acquisition processes that give them the best opportunity to continue their outstanding efforts in the most successful and useful way.

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