

The Howard Government's Defence White Paper: Policy, Process and Politics

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ABSTRACT

The Howard government's recent defence white paper was said by its authors to be the result of a new and more open and rigorous approach to policymaking. The document was seen by some to be the 'best Australian Defence White Paper yet'. I argue that, although novel, the preparation of the white paper was not as democratic or far-reaching as government spokespeople suggested. The process was more about politics than policy, driven in large measure by the desires and vested interests of the major actors within the defence establishment and those, primarily within industry and government, who stand to gain from the \$160 billion to be spent on Australia's defence over the coming decade. As a result, the policy advocated by the white paper was little more than a repackaged version of the ones that preceded it and, as such, continued to exhibit many of the contradictions, problems and weaknesses of its predecessors.

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On 6 December 2000, the Howard government released its long-awaited white paper on Australia's defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*.¹ The preparation of the document was said by its authors to be a new, more open and more rigorous approach to policy making, where some 'tough decisions' were made and Australia was at last provided with a concerted future plan of action.² The white paper was subsequently described by the Minister for Defence as 'the most comprehensive reappraisal of Australian defence capability for decades', and one that set 'new standards' in both the 'clarity with which the fundamentals of our strategic policy are explained', and 'in the way the people of Australia have been drawn into the policy process'.³ These assessments were supported by a number of academic and other commentators who variously described *Defence 2000* as a 'benchmark' and 'well-reasoned' document and, even, the 'best Australian Defence White Paper yet'.⁴

The preparation of the Howard government's defence white paper was certainly a novel planning exercise, involving the prior release of a public discussion paper that set out the choices before us, extensive consideration by Cabinet ministers and, for the first time, the inclusion of the Australian people in its deliberations.⁵ However as I argue in detail below, though this exercise was novel, it was far from the rational, democratic, and far-reaching one lauded by government spokespersons and their supporters. The choices canvassed were really non-choices. The population (and probably Cabinet as well) were implicated rather than included in the decision-making process. The debate over Australia's future defence needs was closed down rather than opened up. The interests of certain key political and bureaucratic actors prevailed over those of the nation at large. And the much-vaunted plan of action for defending Australian and its interests into the future was little more than a repackaged version of the ones that had preceded it. As such, it exhibited many of the contradictions of its predecessors and suffered from similar constraints and problems. These are examined in more detail in the concluding section of the article following an examination of the lead-up to the release of *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* and a discussion of its principal prescriptions and arguments.

¹ Department of Defence, *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service, DPS OCT010/2000).

² *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force*, p. vi.

³ Peter Reith, 'Minister's Message', *Australian Defence Force Journal* (Special Edition), 147: 3, March/April 2001.

⁴ See, for example, Ross Babbage, 'After the White Paper: Eight Key Challenges that Lie Ahead', *Australian Defence Force Journal* (Special Edition), 147: 13–5, March/April 2001 and Paul Dibb, 'Australia's Best Defence White Paper?', *Australian Defence Force Journal* (Special Edition), 147: 28–30, March/April 2001.

⁵ In addition to going to the public on the issue, the government also asked Professor Paul Dibb, from the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, and Air Vice-Marshal Brendan O'Loughlin (Retd), then Head of the Australian Defence College, to seek the views of members of the Australian Defence Force. The findings of this latter review, which also informed the white paper, were not publicly released.

Changing Direction: From 'Self-Reliance Plus' to 'Forward Response'

On gaining office in 1996, the Howard government announced that there would be a basic 'rethink' of Australia's existing defence policy. In addition to making the defence establishment as a whole more efficient and cost-effective, the government would also enhance the combat and power projection capabilities of the Australian Defence Force (ADF), revitalise Australia's existing alliance relationships, and extend Labor's initial efforts towards greater regional military cooperation.⁶ The rationale for the latter changes was spelt out in a new strategic basis document, entitled *Australia's Strategic Policy 1997* (ASP97). In his preface to this document, the then Minister for Defence, Ian McLachlan, argued that 'Australia's strategic interests do not begin and end at our shoreline' and that, as a consequence, the ADF must be able to be 'successfully deployed in *any* conflict in which Australia's interests are vitally engaged'. It must also be able to 'help shape our regional environment, enhance a sense of security of our neighbours, support our allies, and deter potential adversaries'.⁷

While the public version of ASP97 indicated that Australia's armed forces would continue to be structured primarily for the defence of Australia and its immediate surrounds, the classified version of the document was later reported to be 'peppered with the term "forward operations"', talked about the need to be able rapidly to deploy Australian forces alongside their US allies in north-east Asia, and flagged the purchase of such weapons as Tomahawk cruise missiles and Apache helicopters.⁸ By the end of 1997, then, Australia appeared to have two defence policies in place: a secret one which was preparing the ADF for war on the Korean peninsula or in the South China Sea, and a sanitised version which was for public consumption and justified the equipment needed for an Asian war in terms of the defence of Australia and its interests. The stage was being set for dismantling, in practice if not quite yet in theory, the conceptual framework that had been put in place by Labor in the mid-1980s and which had informed Australia's defence policies and practices into the 1990s.

⁶ Ian McLachlan, 'Australian Defence Policy in the Year 2000', in Helen Hookey and Denny Roy (eds), *Australian Defence Planning: Five Views from Policy Makers* (Canberra: Canberra Papers on Strategy and Defence No. 120, Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1997), pp. 1–12.

⁷ Department of Defence, *Australia's Strategic Policy* (Canberra: Directorate of Publishing and Visual Publications, DPUBS 29785/97), p. iii. Just how far Australia's forces might have been required to operate was reflected in the further statement, on pp. 9–10, that 'In the 1970s and 1980s, Australia defined its region of primary strategic interest as Southeast Asia and the South Pacific... That is no longer true. Today, our strategic interests are directly engaged throughout the wider Asia-Pacific region because events beyond our nearer neighbourhood could have direct effects within it'. A similar message was given in Hugh White, 'New Directions in Australian Defence Planning', in Hookey and Roy (eds), *Australian Defence Planning: Five Views from Policy Makers*, pp. 13–26.

⁸ See John Lyons, 'Operation Backflip', *Bulletin*, 3 August 1999, pp. 20–5.

At the time of the release of ASP97, the prospects of the government and the department completing this transition seemed favourable. Continuing economic growth had made Australia's near region look deceptively benign and untroubled. On the home front, Labor had long ceased to say anything new about defence and, in any case, remained fundamentally constrained by its leader's close association with the ADF's existing military modernisation program. There was only negligible debate taking place within the media over defence and security at the time and, aided by government programs and propaganda, the public's perceptions of its defence forces remained positive if somewhat outdated. The major obstacle to the implementation of the government's new policy was, as always, resources. The kinds of weapons and capabilities being touted were not cheap. In spite of its Herculean efforts to save money, the Department of Defence was having trouble meeting its existing commitments and, without more funds, was faced with the prospect of block equipment obsolescence early in the new century. While Howard was in favour of increasing the defence vote, he had to convince his more sceptical colleagues that such a policy was both reasonable and sensible, especially in view of the almost daily reports of financial mismanagement and excess by the Department of Defence.

The events of 1998 further complicated the government's efforts to implement its new 'forward response' posture. The Asian economic crisis and the subsequent events in Indonesia and East Timor undermined the analysis contained in ASP97 and fostered growing debate in the media about the content and future direction of Australia's defence and security policies. Included here was the suggestion that the experience of the ADF in East Timor could be the way of the future and that it should therefore be structured for these kinds of contingencies rather than the defence of Australia or its surrounding region against conventional military attacks. The debate intensified in September 1999 with the release of the so-called 'Howard doctrine' that blew the cover on the real purposes of 'forward response' and led Australia to be painted as the United States' 'deputy sheriff' in the region.⁹ While Howard quickly distanced himself from this latter accusation, he was roundly criticised both at home and abroad. Things were getting out of control and something needed to be done quickly.

The government's best chance of re-establishing order continued to be its forthcoming defence white paper. This had been promised in the wake of the Asian economic crisis but its release kept being postponed as Australia's strategic planners sought to come to terms not only with the crisis and its aftermath but such further developments as the apparent rapprochement between North and South Korea, the coups and counter-coups in Fiji, and the announcement, by New Zealand's incoming Labour government, that it would not purchase any more Anzac frigates from

⁹ See Fred Brenchley, 'The Howard Defence Doctrine', *Bulletin*, 28 September 1999, pp. 22–4; Robert Garran, 'Howard's doctrine backflip', *Australian*, 28 September 1999, p. 1; and Hamish McDonald, 'The lonesome cowboy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 October 1999, p. 13.

Australia. While the white paper would provide a new strategic rationale for the government's plans, there was also the task of justifying an increase in the defence budget. The best approach to this second issue, it was decided, would be to consult the people on it in the lead-up to the white paper's release. This had the dual advantage of assuaging the fears of the government's internal critics and circumventing those commentators and other 'experts' who were calling for unwanted changes in Australia's defence policies. It would also look good in the electorate provided, of course, that the people delivered the messages the government and its advisers wanted to hear. To meet this last objective, the government first ensured that the public consultation process proceeded around its own discussion paper, and second, kept control of the means and manner in which the views of the Australian people were obtained and were reported.

Texts and Subtexts: The Defence Discussion Paper

At Parliament House on 27 June 2000 the Prime Minister launched a public information or 'green' paper on defence entitled *Defence Review 2000: Our Future Defence Force*.¹⁰ Prepared by the Department of Defence, this document and an accompanying video spelt out the 'key issues for decision' in the government's forthcoming defence white paper. These covered four sets of concerns: what was happening globally and in our region? What do we want Australia's military forces to be able to do? What does our current force look like and how much does (and should) it cost? And what sort of military force will we need in future: one structured primarily for defeating attacks on Australia itself, one structured for a regional security role, or one that might be used to conduct so-called operations other than conventional war? Within these broad areas were a number of sub-questions and contending options. The former included whether war was a thing of the past and what were Australia's national, regional and global 'strategic interests'? The key policy options canvassed were: 'alliance versus self-reliance', 'independent action versus coalition operations', 'defending Australia versus regional commitments', 'quality versus quantity', and 'conventional wars versus non-combat military operations'.

While on the surface the discussion paper provided a reasonable and relatively comprehensive overview of the dilemmas and concerns confronting our defence policy-makers today, a closer reading revealed it to be a carefully constructed and scripted document that led the reader ineluctably to views or conclusions that served the government and the Defence Department's case. Although the paper talked about contending options (and associated choices), for example, its central message was that we needed to cover all the options raised rather than choose between them — a position that was repeated almost on cue in a range of subsequent media commentaries. Thus the increasingly complex and demanding nature of our strategic

¹⁰ Department of Defence, *Defence Review 2000 — Our Future Defence Force: A Public Discussion Paper* (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service DPS 38459/2000, 2000).

environment was said to require policies and structures that would ‘serve us well in the widest range of eventualities’ rather than any move towards focussing our military efforts on selected tasks or responsibilities. While acknowledging that the ADF would become more and more involved in ‘lower-level operations’, the paper stated that Australia’s strategic interests (as defined by its authors) also required us to plan to participate in coalition warfare and other higher-level military operations. The prospect both of a direct military attack on Australia and the incidence of inter-state war was said to be declining, but neither could prudently be ruled out and therefore both needed to be prepared for. The discussion paper made clear, of course, and here was the rub, that if Australia’s existing level of defence spending were maintained, our policy-makers would have little choice other than to choose between the options canvassed. The only way to avoid this unwelcome choice was to increase, at ‘a rate higher than inflation’, Australia’s defence budget (p. 56).

This basic message was reinforced by a number of other, no less self-serving, arguments and assertions that were strategically located throughout the paper. On page eight, for example, we were told that defence was ‘an integral part of the way Australia interacted with other countries’, and that our defence force ‘says something about Australia that is important to the way we are perceived by others, and to the way we see ourselves’. Further on the paper declared that if we ‘did nothing to upgrade our forces while our neighbours continued to increase theirs...we would start to lose the assurance we have enjoyed with our superior air and maritime forces of being able to defeat any major attacks on Australia’ (p. 18). In the same section it was asserted that the ‘more diverse our forces, the wider our range of strategic options, the harder it would be for an adversary to defeat us’. In later sections we heard repeated the mantra that military forces developed and maintained for conventional warfighting operations were all that were needed to deal with ‘lower-level’ peacekeeping and other non-traditional security tasks.

These sentiments were presented with little comment or context, as self-evident ‘truths’ rather than considered arguments or conclusions. There was no attempt, for example, to ask whether there were alternative and more effective ways of Australia representing itself in a post-industrial and increasingly globalised world, no considered appreciation of whether Australia’s actions may actually encourage the regional militarisation dynamic we seemed to be so concerned about, and no discussion of the circumstances that could lead to us being directly threatened or attacked. The use of the mantra ‘structuring for war and adapting for peace’ was part of a secondary strategy of misrepresenting and denigrating those options that did not fit into the government’s preferred script for defending Australia and its interests. While this approach was used throughout the paper, it was most evident in the discussion of the third force structure option for the ADF — contributing to operations other than conventional war. Here the authors ignored the contextual case for such an option and simply insisted that ‘an enhanced peacekeeping capability

would involve greater resources' and lead to 'significant cuts...to our forces' war fighting components'. In case we had not got the message, the authors further stated that the option represented a 'major departure in current policy' and one that would take us down the path of New Zealand! (p. 62).

While more open and forthcoming than most earlier policy documents, then, the discussion paper was less an analysis and discussion of what may be required for achieving peace and security in a post-Cold War world, than an explication of the advantages and importance of the government's current approach and policies. Like past white papers on defence, it was more an exercise in discursive writing than in critical thinking, framing the contents and arguments in ways that suited its own interests, judgements and ends and justifying these by invoking the language of power and patriotism.

Manufacturing Consent: The Politics of the Public Consultation Process

The release of the public discussion paper on defence and the subsequent consultative process were trumpeted by the Howard government as a 'new', even 'unprecedented', approach to defence policymaking. The stated reason for this new stance was that, in view of major changes taking place around us, the debate about Australia's defence had to be extended beyond the small number of academics and other specialists who were normally involved in the process to include 'all Australians'. By going beyond the 'experts', the government hoped to 'encourage a vigorous, challenging and constructive discussion' of the issues involved. It would also, according to the government, help the people of Australia obtain a 'better understanding' of the issues that had to be considered in preparing defence policy generally and the forthcoming white paper in particular.¹¹

While these kinds of objectives were laudable, a close inspection of the consultation process revealed it to be a far more orchestrated and far less democratic exercise than the government's rhetoric suggested. As predicted by numerous commentators it was more an exercise in politics than policy-making, one primarily concerned with garnering support for policies wanted or in train than with openly engaging the Australian community or seeking new or alternatives ideas about how Australian defence should proceed in the future. This was revealed, firstly, in how the exercise was both constructed and conducted. As detailed elsewhere, the Community Consultation Team (CCT) responsible for seeking the community's views comprised people who either came from the government's ranks or were on the record as supporting positions that accorded closely with those advocated by the government

¹¹ *Defence Review 2000: Our Future Defence Force: A Public Discussion Paper*, p.1.

or the Department of Defence.¹² The CCT was given less than three months to talk to the community and distil its views. This meant that it held its public hearings at the same time as written submissions were being received, thereby lessening the chance of any real dialogue among those contributing to the process. The consultation team afforded privileged access to various returned services' organisations and those groups representing the interests of local governments and Australian businesses. Its schedule of public meetings was heavily biased towards rural and regional Australia where the audiences were largely male, came from the older sections of society, and held generally traditional views on the issues of defence and security. The chairs of the meetings held outside the capital cities often led their audiences by reporting on the results of earlier meetings including, in some cases, the emerging 'consensus of views'. Finally, to cover the possibility of something unforeseen occurring, the government directed that the consultation team's report be drafted by officials from the Department of Defence, and insisted from the outset that it was under no obligation to accept the findings of the CCT.

The second indication of the political nature of the consultation process was reflected in the way the report of the CCT, *Australian Perspectives on Defence*,¹³ delivered to the government on 4 October 2000, was written and presented. As flagged by CCT members in a number of press interviews conducted during the consultation process, the report argued that there was strong community interest in the future of Australia's defence, and claimed majority support for a number of basic propositions. These included: 1) going to the people on the issue; 2) an increase in defence spending combined with continuing fiscal discipline within the Department of Defence; 3) a continuing focus on the defence of Australia but including a capacity, alone or with coalition partners, to undertake 'significant' operations within the region; 4) a properly equipped and well-balanced ADF that is structured for war-fighting rather than peacekeeping roles; 5) greater recognition of the needs of service personnel, the reserve force and the interests of regional Australia; 6) Australia should seek to be self-reliant within an alliance framework; and 7) greater emphasis placed on defence industry participation.

While there was no reason to doubt that the report's overall findings generally reflected what was said to the CCT, the way in which these findings were reported and represented provided at least two grounds for concern. To begin with, the extensive use of such terms as 'most people', 'widespread appreciation', 'the majority of the public', 'strong support', and 'a broad view' gave the impression, innocently or otherwise, that the findings in the report reflected the views of the Australian people

¹² Graeme Cheeseman and Hugh Smith, 'Public consultation or political choreography? The Howard Government's quest for community views on defence policy', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55(1): 83–100, April 2001.

¹³ *Australian Perspectives on Defence: Report of the Community Consultation Team* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, September 2000).

at large and so delivered a popular mandate to the government. Yet the CCT received only 1,157 formal submissions and some 9,000 telephone calls and e-mail messages, and only about 2,000 people attended its meetings across Australia. The report of the CCT was not particularly forthcoming on who exactly it heard from, saw and spoke to. It listed the individuals and groups that made written submissions and that addressed the CCT in private meetings.¹⁴ It also provided, in an annex entitled 'demographics', some basic data about those who made written submission or requested information. But the report provided no information about who attended or spoke at the various public meetings, nor did it analyse or comment on whether the submissions received, or the comments made to it, could reasonably be said to represent the views of the Australian community overall.

This was probably for good reason. An analysis by this author and a colleague of the community consultation process in the eastern states of Australia revealed that the audiences at the regional meetings in particular were predominantly male and middle-aged or older. There were very few women or young people present and almost no people of obvious Australian Aboriginal or non-Anglo/European backgrounds. This observed pattern was even more marked among those who spoke at the public meetings:

Nearly 90 per cent of those we saw addressing the CCT were male. Just under half of the speakers made known their association with the armed forces or the defence establishment e.g. serving ADF members, ex-members, reservists, [and] representatives of defence industry. The other significant groupings that could be identified were local politicians and officials and, in the capital cities only, members of peace and other community groups (representing under ten per cent of the speakers in each case).¹⁵

On this basis we concluded that the voices heard by the CCT at its public meetings were not necessarily those of the 'average Australian' since they came disproportionately from interests associated in one way or another with both the government and the defence establishment. This finding alone, we suggested, cast doubt on the CCT's claim, contained in the foreword to its report, that its findings represented 'what the Australian public [as a whole] has told us'.¹⁶ It was reinforced by the report's own demographic data which showed, for example, that the bulk of both the written submissions and the requests for information came from men. It

¹⁴ Including those who, like the author, had published commentaries on the consultation process in the July/August 2000 edition of the *Australian Defence Force Journal*.

¹⁵ Cheeseman and Smith, 'Public consultation or political choreography?', p. 92.

¹⁶ The government could argue that it had no control over who did (or did not) attend the public meetings, and that it placed no limitations on either who was allowed to speak or what was said. This is true, although the argument applied only to the open meetings and did not explain why the report of the CCT did not discuss whether or not those it heard from constituted a representative sample of the Australian population.

was also consistent with the fact that the CCT held its private meetings almost exclusively with representatives from industry, organisations associated with the armed forces, and both state and local government representatives. Clearly the voices and views heard by the CCT came primarily from those sectors of society that were sympathetic to the defence establishment and its aims. Yet the CCT chose not to highlight this potential conflict of interest or to remark on its possible significance.

A second concern stemmed from the strong correlation between the report's *key findings* — listed in its executive summary and government press releases — and the government and/or the Defence Department's own preferred policies and rhetoric. Among the report's key findings, for example, was the view that 'the public believes that our military capabilities need to be well-resourced and well-balanced so that the Defence Force can respond quickly and effectively in a wide range of circumstances'. While acknowledging that 'most people believe that the first and foremost task for the ADF is the defence of Australia', the report added that 'an integral part of this belief is an expectation that the ADF, alone or with coalition partners, should be able to undertake significant operations within the region'. It found there was 'widespread concern' among the public that the 'treatment of defence industry in the Public Discussion Paper was grossly inadequate and that the issue needed much more comprehensive examination in the forthcoming Defence Policy Statement'. And 'most people' were said to have stated that 'the ADF should be structured to maintain a war fighting capability', and that Australia should have a 'blue water capable' navy, a 'capacity for long-range strike operations', and, even, an army 'able to sustain combat operations in two separate locations'!

While these kinds of sentiments were expressed by some (usually interested) parties, it is inconceivable, for example, that the majority or even a large number of those who wrote or spoke to the CCT would have argued specifically for an army 'able to sustain combat operations in two separate locations'. The strong suspicion was that those drafting the report interpreted rather than repeated what they heard from the public especially in the areas that mattered most to our defence planners: Australia's 'strategic fundamentals' and the structure and capabilities of the ADF. This suspicion was reinforced by the absence of any critical or dissenting views or arguments among the report's key findings, and their use — prominently displayed in brightly coloured boxes — to reinforce and underpin the arguments contained in the forthcoming defence white paper.

The Howard Government's Defence White Paper

The white paper was prepared by a team led by the Deputy Secretary Strategy and Intelligence in the Department of Defence, Hugh White, and, given its genesis, was most likely largely drafted before the community consultation process had even begun. In his introduction to the document, the then Minister for Defence, John

Moore, stated that ‘tough decisions’ on defence were needed and that they had been made. Predictably these ‘tough decisions’ involved, first, the decision to allocate sufficient extra resources to the defence program to enable the Defence Department’s long-standing modernisation program to continue. Second, the government would put in place measures to ensure that the capability outcomes described in the white paper were actually delivered. Third, and most importantly, it provided the ‘most specific and detailed defence plan produced by any Australian government in more than 25 years’ (p. 4), one, moreover, that had the broad support of the Australian people.

Not surprisingly, the Howard government’s Defence Capability Plan, described in Chapter 8 of the white paper, was very similar to that advocated in ASP97. Australia would acquire and sustain a capacity to: launch strikes against military and other targets located throughout Australia’s nearer region; detect and defeat conventional military attacks on Australia itself; maintain a combat-capable surface fleet able to operate with US and regional forces throughout the region and in ‘a wide range of circumstances’; and deploy and sustain combat-capable land forces in operations both in Australia and in our immediate neighbourhood. The ADF’s existing military inventory would be expanded to include such new or replacement equipment and capabilities as armed reconnaissance helicopters, an enhanced amphibious and air-lift capability, AEW&C aircraft, air-defence capable warships, and a new, high-technology combat aircraft. This more capable ADF would continue to be supported by a sustainable and competitive defence industry — Australia’s ‘fourth arm’ — and by the Defence Science and Technology Organisation (that would play a leading role in exploiting the potential gains offered by the so-called ‘revolution in military affairs’ or RMA).

In line with the position advocated in the defence discussion paper, the expansion of Australia’s conventional warfighting and force projection capabilities was said to be needed, primarily, to satisfy Australia’s self-declared strategic interests and objectives.¹⁷ The acquisition of high-technology forces and capabilities was also necessary to facilitate ongoing interoperability with the armed forces of the United States and its allies, and was an important component of what was termed the ‘bigger picture’. This saw Australia’s armed forces as ‘not simply a service provided by government’. They were also ‘part of our national identity’, representing ‘the kind of country we are, the role we seek to play in the world, and the way we see ourselves’

¹⁷ These were, in order of priority, to: 1) ensure the defence of Australia and its direct approaches from direct military attack; 2) help foster the security of our immediate neighbourhood against both internal and external threats to stability and order; 3) work with others to promote stability and cooperation in South-East Asia (in effect to help ‘maintain a resilient regional community that can cooperate to prevent the intrusion of potentially hostile external powers and resolve peacefully any problems that arise between countries’); 4) support strategic stability in the wider Asia– Pacific region; and 5) contribute to the efforts of the international community especially the United Nations to uphold global security, and support the United States in maintaining and strengthening the global security order.

(p. 7). As expected, although acknowledging that Australia's armed forces would be involved more and more in peace and other low-level security operations, the white paper declared that they would continue to be structured and largely equipped and trained for conventional war-fighting roles.

Conclusions: Responding to 'Forward Response'

As Australia moved into 2001 the government and the Defence Department's defence and security agenda was back on track. The capabilities and equipment needed for the posture of 'forward response' or the 'regional defence of Australia' as the posture was later called,¹⁸ were now on order or in train. While a few 'expert' commentators continued to grumble about the Howard government's new defence plan, it was generally well received by the Australian media and had the apparent *imprimatur* of the Australian people (and therefore of the federal opposition). The government had won considerable plaudits, and possibly a few votes in the bush as well, for going to the people on the issue. Australia's defence planners no longer had to worry about how to fund their favoured weapons and equipment upgrades. It was no longer faced with the coming resources 'train smash', or the prospect of block equipment obsolescence, or having to choose between contending capability or force structure options. The fact that the white paper process constituted clever politics, however, did not make it sound strategic planning. The government's strategy may have ensured the survival of 'forward response', but it also meant that many of the contradictions and flaws that were associated with that posture were also maintained. Because of this, it is unlikely that the present situation (and the smiles all round seen at the launch of the Howard government's white paper) will last. As in the past, some of the key assumptions that underpin the government's defence plan will soon be tested and will prove to not be viable.

The most important of these assumptions is the availability of resources. The achievement of the government's Defence Capability Plan requires Australia's defence expenditure to be increased by around three per cent per annum in real terms for the next decade (and probably much longer if we proceed to buy a replacement for the F/A-18 and F-111 aircraft). Electoral pressures have already eroded the government's capacity to deliver on this promise *and* maintain or expand services in other Commonwealth sectors. The experience of the Fraser and Hawke governments' defence plans also suggests that the present (or any future) government may soon renege on its funding proposals and begin either to defer or to cancel the promised funding increases. Past experience further suggests that it is unlikely that the Department of Defence will be able to contain the costs of the proposed program, especially if it continues to pursue its present RMA-led fantasies, and it seeks to maintain technological and other edges over prospective regional adversaries. It will

¹⁸ See Hon. Peter Reith, MP, Minister for Defence, *Defence 2000 and the defence of Australia* (Canberra: Ministerial Information Paper, April 2001), p. 4.

not be long, therefore, before the earlier pressures on the defence program return and our defence planners, once again, cry poor and seek still more taxpayers' money.

These pressures will be compounded by the government's decision effectively to broaden the ADF's mission beyond the defence of Australia, and to insist that our forces continue to be structured and equipped for conventional warfighting roles. This enabled the Department of Defence to justify the continued acquisition and upgrade of a range of favoured weapons platforms. But it also makes it more difficult to provide sufficient forces for likely future operations. By seeking to have in place a 'balanced' force, capable of responding 'quickly and effectively in a wide range of circumstances', the government has lessened the actual number of circumstances where it can deploy forces effectively. This is most evident in the area of likely greatest demand in the post-Cold War era: peace operations. While acknowledging that the ADF would be involved more and more in complex emergencies of the kind we saw in Somalia, Bougainville and East Timor, the government's much-vaunted Defence Capability Plan still only enables the ADF to deploy and sustain a single brigade group on such operations. As our experience in East Timor has shown, and a recent parliamentary inquiry into the future size and shape of the Australian Army argued, this ground force deployment capacity is likely to be entirely inadequate.¹⁹

The white paper sought to cover over this limitation by arguing that forces structured for war were also sufficient for conducting peace operations. This may be true in principle but, in practice, it depends upon what kind of operations and forces we are talking about. The forces being acquired for Australia's strategic strike, air combat and coalition warfare missions may be able to play important subsidiary roles in East Timor-like operations, but they cannot substitute for either peacekeepers or peacemakers on the ground. Similarly, ground forces that are adequately structured, equipped and trained for defeating a similarly armed adversary on the battlefield, can represent an inappropriate (and very costly) means of dealing with complex emergencies in which there are no clear adversaries.²⁰ Unlike the case for coalition warfare contingencies, the white paper also went to some length to spell out the

¹⁹ The Parliament of Australia, *From Phantom to Force: Towards a More Efficient and Effective Army*, (Canberra: Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). The Joint Standing Committee recommended that Australia should maintain a force-in-being of four brigades optimised for operations in Australia's area of critical security interest and capable of deploying within no more than four months warning.

²⁰ For contending views on this issue, see Graeme Cheeseman, 'Army's Fundamentals of Land Warfare: A Doctrine for "New Times"?', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, 139: 5–16, November/December 1999 and Alan Ryan, 'The Challenge of "New Times": Developing a Doctrine for an Uncertain Future', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, 142: 49–54, May/June 2000. An interesting discussion of the issue from an American perspective is contained in Jennifer Morrison Taw, 'Planning for military operations other than war: the lessons from US Army efforts', in Desmond Ball (ed), *Maintaining the Strategic Edge: The Defence of Australia in 2015* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, Australian National University, 1999), pp. 207–28.

circumstances that had to be met before Australia's military forces would be deployed (or not deployed — the real aim of such caveats) on peace operations. Again, as demonstrated by the East Timor experience, such prior conditions cannot realistically be enforced in the face of strong media, public or international pressure. Planning on the basis of restrictive deployments may be a clever bureaucratic ploy but it increases the risk of ill-prepared deployments and the loss of Australian lives.

The emphasis given in Australia's defence planning to warfighting over peace making also sits uneasily with the white paper's relatively benign and generally positive assessment of Australia's evolving strategic circumstances. While there existed certain causes for concern, the 'forces of peace and security in the Asia Pacific' were also said to be strong and were being 'helped by the growth of regional multilateral structures and frameworks'. The prospects of an outright conflict between the major powers in the region was judged to be small as was the likelihood of Australia being directly attacked, although we had to remain on our guard and be ready to assist the United States in its crucial power-balancing role. On the other hand, the paper noted that many countries in Australia's immediate region faced significant social, economic and structural problems that, if not resolved, could adversely affect our security environment. While this was thought unlikely to translate into any direct military threat to Australia, it did require us to be ready to deploy our forces with others to help neighbours in need. In view of this analysis, we have to wonder on what basis the government and its advisers have chosen to continue to plan our defence efforts around the defence of Australia, and its surrounding region, against invasion or major military attack, and why they have so readily dismissed the option of structuring and equipping a greater proportion of our forces for non-military security operations and operations other than conventional war.

A second, questionable set of assumptions concerns the role of Australia's defence industry, the so-called 'fourth arm' of our defence posture. As we saw, representatives from Australian industry successfully lobbied to retain their privileged place in the defence decision-making process and to share in the considerable benefits that will flow from the government's new and expanded defence procurement plan. In addition to whether, in light of the Collins Class submarines, the over-the-horizon radar network (JORN), the mine-hunter catamaran and other costly projects, Australian industry can efficiently and cost-effectively support the kinds of leading-edge weapons and technologies that are wanted in order to stay in the RMA race, there is the question of whether the defence industry base that has been developed so far, and will be maintained under the new program, is the right one for the times we are entering. Australia has, since the mid-1980s, put in place a major ship-building industry that has been generally unable to sell its wares overseas and will continue to depend on local orders to maintain its existing and very expensive infrastructure and workforce. As evidenced by the debate over the two extra submarines for Australia, instead of reviewing the need for such an industry,

successive governments seem determined to shape Australia's strategic circumstances (and associated defence force structure) to continue to support the various domestic political and industrial interests involved.

Overall, it is difficult not to conclude that, the claims of the government notwithstanding, the preparation and presentation of Australia's latest defence white paper were more about politics than policy, driven in large measure by the desires, judgements and vested interests of the major actors within the defence establishment and those, primarily within industry and government, who stand to gain from the \$160 billion that will be outlaid on defence over the coming decade. While this result has been achieved with little public or political discord, it has probably only postponed rather than solved the basic management and resource problems that have bedevilled Australian defence planning since the mid-1980s. More importantly, by reframing the defence debate in largely domestic political rather than broader conceptual, strategic or even ideological terms, the government and the opposition may have constrained their capacity to further reform Australia's military institutions, cultures and practices. This is a shame not only because it will limit continued change on Russell Hill, but also because it will lessen Australia's capacity to respond innovatively and effectively to its emerging, and significantly different and more complex, security environment.²¹ The Howard government may have made some 'tough decisions' on ADF force structure and capabilities but it has not really come to terms with the 'new times' we are entering.²² Its preference for pragmatism and populism also means that Australia's armed forces will continue to be structured for wars of the past rather than the 'complex emergencies' of the future, and our service men and women will continue to be inadequately equipped and prepared for the low-level military interventions that will continue to be needed in our immediate region and beyond.

²¹ See also Stewart Woodman, 'Not quite the full Monty? Analysing Australia's 2000 Defence White Paper', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 55(1): 29–36, April 2001 and D. F. Quigley, 'A Considered View', *Australian Defence Force Journal* (Special Edition), 147: 41–4, March/April 2001.

²² For discussions of these 'new times' and their implications for the role of military force and military forces, see James Burk (ed.), *The Military in New Times: Adapting Armed Forces to a Turbulent World* (Boulder CO: Westview Press 1994); Kalevi J. Holsti, *The State, War and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Pinter, 1999).