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# The ‘People’ Perspective

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The people-related intentions enumerated in the 2013 White Paper are timely, appropriate and sensible, and will help the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to adjust to an impending era of lower pace and a more nebulous threat. The White Paper asserts the need to maintain personnel numbers, push on with integration and inclusiveness, improve management of education and training, and strengthen support for both families and the treatment and management of mental health and post-traumatic stress. The major cause for concern is the White Paper’s excessive emphasis on using ‘programs’ as the major vehicles for organisational change, rather than relying more on simply improving basic, commonsense ways of doing things. This article argues that, with the right people systems and the right leadership, the ADF can turn many of the challenges of adjusting to a lower tempo era to its advantage.

## ‘People’ in the 2013 White Paper: A Lot to Like

From a personnel perspective, there are several themes in the White Paper that augur well for the future development of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The first such theme is in respect to the fundamental factor of maintenance of numbers. After a protracted period of high pace, high engagement and clear threat, the institution is apprehensive about the prospect of an immediate era of exactly the opposite. However, the White Paper makes it clear that, although Defence may be required to operate with a more limited budget, it won’t be asked to do this with fewer people.<sup>1</sup> This is eminently sensible. The strategic outlook and emphasis on defence engagement in the White Paper highlight issues and developments that range from the Indo-Pacific to the immediate region, including the need to prepare for the implications of the effects of widespread climate change and technological advances. Future operations are thus likely to be not only more varied but more complex. They will demand much in terms of the military institution’s leadership capability and professional skills—if anything, in fact, one might question whether a force of 59,000 is sufficient for the designated responsibilities. Numbers must be maintained if only to keep all core trades viable, although the level of skill required in virtually every employment area at every level is such that one would be hard pressed to find many “non-core” trades. Army in particular probably breathed a collective sigh of relief when the White Paper was published, given that it has so often been the “boots on the ground” component that has been cut to make way for expensive high-tech capabilities in the other two Services.

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<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013* (Canberra: Department of Defence, 2013, para 7.10.

A second welcome theme was the increased emphasis on inclusiveness. The White Paper's focus in this respect was on achieving greater participation levels of currently-underrepresented groups, specifically women (especially in the Army), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and reservists. Part of this thrust will be a focus on increasing the diversity in the ADF Cadets. The White Paper mentions the creation of a Diversity Council, a Diversity Champion and a Diversity Strategy.<sup>2</sup> While the precise functions of each of these entities are not mentioned, but it is presumed that this is because, at least in the short term, they will be 'works in progress'. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation will be encouraged by the activities of a Defence Indigenous Employment Strategy and the Defence Reconciliation Action Plan. The twin aims here are to build on Defence's contribution to community engagement and development, and to improve the recruitment and retention of this particular population segment.

The White Paper discusses the issue of female inclusiveness in terms of the earlier decision to lift the remaining restrictions to female employment in the combat trades, and expanding women's training and promotion opportunities by setting gender targets for greater participation at the Australian Command and Staff College and the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies.<sup>3</sup> In addition, ADF promotion boards and selection panels for senior ranking positions will include at least one woman and one external (i.e., non-ADF) member. This expansion of opportunities is aimed at facilitating greater diversity at the more senior levels of leadership, a move that is likely to result in a number of longer term benefits. Army as the main focus here has set itself a target of doubling its annual female recruitment target in order to increase its recruitment of women by 20% by 2014.<sup>4</sup>

There is little question that the ADF takes the diversity issue very seriously. For example, diversity was mentioned in virtually every one of the interviews conducted as part of a recent study of ADF strategic leadership.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the ADF's most senior officers readily concede that institutional performance in this regard still leaves much to be desired. And, with a number of these interviews having been conducted prior to the series of incidents in 2011 that gave rise to the various reviews of professional conduct (most notably, in this specific respect, to the Broderick Review), it is plain that the Service Chiefs had been thinking seriously along these lines for some time, i.e. before they were specifically directed to do so. In many ways, in fact, the Broderick and other reviews facilitated the Chiefs' ability to gain institutional acceptance of the broad kinds of initiatives that they already

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., paras 10.16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., paras 10.19-21, 10.27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., para 10.26.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Jans, Stephen Mugford, Jamie Cullens and Judy Frazer-Jans, *The Chiefs: A Study of Strategic Leadership* (Canberra: Australian Defence College, 2013), esp. pp. 72, 110-111.

had in mind, with the White Paper simply endorsing, formalising and further legitimizing their intentions.

A third encouraging theme relates to education and training. While the ADF already does a very thorough job of turning new entrants into competent professionals and of progressively upgrading technical and leadership skills in the junior and mid-career stages, there is room for improvement in the educational programs aimed at enhancing higher level strategic leadership capacity (i.e., for O7 and beyond). Again, the Chiefs themselves clearly acknowledge this.<sup>6</sup> The White Paper states the very sensible intention of developing ADF and Australian Public Service joint and common education and training programs and of developing the Australian Defence College (ADC) further as a key provider of shared education and training services.<sup>7</sup> It is to be hoped that this will be supported by appropriate thinking about and resourcing for social science research that will generate findings and insights that can be used to enhance leadership capability, together with the overall career experience and organisational agility and performance generally.

Finally, the White Paper includes three very necessary and arguably 'not-before-time' programs. First, there is to be a greater emphasis on continuing to adapt institutional culture, consistent with the various recent reviews and in the light of contemporary realities.<sup>8</sup> Again, *The Chiefs* study shows that senior officers had already been thinking along these lines prior to the various 2011 reviews; and, as with the Chiefs' intention to achieve greater inclusiveness, these will confirm and add weight to the need for cultural change at the middle and lower levels. However, while the White Paper discusses the issue of 'culture' largely in respect to gender employment and acceptance, there is much more to culture than this. For example, one target for cultural fine-tuning is to lift professional understanding of broad sociological trends at both the organisational and societal levels. Again, this is an outcome that is likely to follow once greater acceptance of inclusiveness is achieved.

The second 'not-before-time' program will be aimed at bolstering support for families. The specific aspects singled out here are the provision of greater access to government services for families and the development of stronger social and community networks. These family support programs will include basic medical and dental care for families living in remote and regional locations, by extending the current trial of healthcare arrangements for another 3 years.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Defence would be wise to regard these as banner projects within a general strategy for placing more emphasis on family support in each Service's retention strategy.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 80-82.

<sup>7</sup> It is a pity that the White Paper didn't use the term "centre for excellence" in this respect, to give the issue further weight.

<sup>8</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, paras 9.16-19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., paras 10.47-53.

Finally, the White Paper commits to strengthening the treatment and management of mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>10</sup> It does so by pledging to continue the significant improvements in such services, including the very sensible and strategically-oriented notion of reinforcing them with comprehensive education and support across all career levels and stages, from pre-recruitment to completion of service.

## Remaining Concerns

In approaching these issues, the White Paper inadvertently highlights Defence's characteristic approach to any major issue; namely to address each issue with a "Review" and a new "Program" (the capitalisation of the relevant label is not unimportant). Thus—to cite just a few—we have the Australian Defence Force Posture Review, the Coles Review; the Rizzo Reviews; and the Strategic Perform Program; the New Navy Generation Program and the Support to Wounded, Injured or Ill Program.<sup>11</sup> However, what is generally needed in many such issues is not so much yet-another-review and yet-another-program, but rather simply an effort to identify and embed sensible ways of framing and tackling problems strategically, managerially and professionally—in simple terms, to use more effective ways of doing normal business.

Topical examples of this concern are 'accountability' and 'culture development'. The recent Black Review's<sup>12</sup> solution for improving accountability and governance in acquisitions centred on a large number of organisational changes, including those to personal and institutional accountability, planning and decision-making, performance management, accountability and contestability in capability development, financial management, the delivery of services across different parts of the Defence Organisation, and skills development. Ironically, it is quite likely that one of the major consequences of simultaneous changes in all these areas will be an increase in bureaucracy that will simply exacerbate the existing problems. It is a pity that the Black Review made no attempt to tackle the issue from a first principles approach. For example, if the processes associated with administration and acquisitions are not as effective as they could be, it is at least in part because the staff at all levels tasked with such responsibilities simply lack the basic "know-how", "know-why" and "know-who" needed to frame and tackle complex problems in a complicated bureaucratic setting.<sup>13</sup> The most likely reason for such competency deficiencies is that the staff officers concerned are subject to the military's widespread practice of staff churn and job rotation aimed at building 'depth' and 'adaptability'. However, the existing research on the performance effects of this practice suggests

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., paras 10.38-43.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., paras 1.25, 9.6, 9.7, 10.25, 10.36.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., para 9.6.

<sup>13</sup> Nick Jans, 'From Black to Black: a reform veteran's perspective of the Black Review', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, no. 186 (2011), pp. 85-87.

that such developmental goals are achieved at the cost of often sub-optimal job and team effectiveness and efficiency. The research suggests that performance would be enhanced by the application of more sensible staff streaming practices and more imaginative team composition.<sup>14</sup> For example, simply increasing the tenure of a few members of each staff team would significantly improve individual and collective performance and collective memory. Ironically, the addition of an extra layer or two of bureaucracy, as Black recommends and as seems likely to be adopted, will probably result in precisely the opposite.

A similar argument applies to improving the delivery of professional education, particularly that at the ADC at Weston Creek. For example, for the past decade or more, the Australian Command and Staff College has been subject to a Directing Staff (DS) turnover rate of around 18 months per person: very few have had lengthy tenure. This means that individual DS must concentrate all their efforts on the preparation and delivery of day-to-day learning activities for current course members, leaving them little time to think about longer term curriculum development and other improvements. Thus an important element in enhancing professional education at the higher levels of the Australian military profession will be to stabilise staff tenure at Weston Creek, at least for a critical mass of DS.

This example points to an area that was disappointingly neglected in the White Paper: that of personnel-related research. While the ADF is generally strong in respect to its people systems, it remains weak in its understanding of just how and why they work so well. This is a consequence largely of its general indifference to appropriately-targeted research. While there are some encouraging local signs in this respect, such as the increasing emphasis on behavioural science research in the Defence Science and Technology Organisation and the Centre for Defence Leadership & Ethics at the ADC, the workforce intelligence component within the Department itself continues to lag in terms of its approach to basic, in-depth research. Enhanced knowledge amounts to enhanced power in this regard, and it is to be hoped that the current leadership team within the people capability area will see this as a key priority for improvement.

A further issue is in respect to financial management, which rightly receives considerable emphasis in the White Paper.<sup>15</sup> This, however, is another aspect in which a new 'program' is likely to be less effective than simply taking a more systematic approach to tackling issues as part of normal business. For example, one of the many encouraging trends in the ADF's strategic leadership group is the emergence of the notion of 'financial

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<sup>14</sup> See for example: N. A. Jans and J. M. Frazer-Jans, 'Job rotation and military capability: benefits, certainly – but is anyone counting the cost?', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, no 146 (2001), pp. 47-59; N. A. Jans and J. M. Frazer-Jans, 'Career development, job rotation and professional performance', *Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2004), pp. 255-278.

<sup>15</sup> See Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, Chapter 7 and paras 9.6-7.

culture'. This refers to having particular sets of habits and ways of thinking about financial resources: it relates particularly to the distinction between 'being frugal' and 'thinking differently about resource allocation and management'. This way of thinking goes beyond simply accepting that some activities and costs have to be shaved, but rather trying to get people at all levels to think automatically about the relationships between finance, capability and the resources needed for day-to-day activities.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, until those who are in charge of both day-to-day and longer term management in the three Services can find ways to get people to understand the individual implications of spending—in the same way as they might, say, see the individual implications for training and career development—it will be simply re-fighting the issue repeatedly on the surface. Again, the right kind of leadership is likely to be far more effective in promoting such an approach than any number of 'programs'.

'Integration' is another area of concern about 'people' in the White Paper. The term is used, for example, in terms of the 'Total Force Employment Model',<sup>17</sup> which is to develop flexible career pathways, competitive remuneration and benefits, and workplace flexibility to assist in the movement between the permanent and reserve components of force. Similarly, the White Paper states the government's intention of "continuing implementation of shared service arrangements" to remove duplication and to streamline processes.<sup>18</sup> All well and good, but the 'integration' concept has a broader and more important use than seems to be recognised in the White Paper. This relates to the opportunities for greater integration of similar intra-Service skill and employment sets, such as Intelligence and Transport, so that they can be used more flexibly across the inter-Service domain. While each Service had been prone to pleading for maintenance of their distinctive version of each such category group, it was apparent during *The Chiefs* interviews that those at the top now have a more realistic and hard-headed approach to this practice, and are looking for opportunities for integration. The benefits will be related not only to efficiency but will also offer the opportunity for greater individual career flexibility.

The final area of concern is about how the ADF is going to adjust—organisationally, professionally and mentally—to the impending era of seemingly low operational tempo. The keyword in the previous sentence is 'seemingly'. While those currently leading the ADF are rightly apprehensive about the adverse consequences of a long hiatus similar to that experienced after Australia's withdrawal from the Vietnam War, a low threat environment in the foreseeable future does not seem particularly likely. The world and our region is a much more uncertain place now, and the ADF—particularly

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<sup>16</sup> Jans, Mugford, Cullens and Frazer-Jans, *The Chiefs*, pp. 76-80.

<sup>17</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Defence White Paper 2013*, paras 10.9-10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, para 10.6.

the Army—will need to be ready for an increasingly range of complex contingencies.

However, if this is a potential problem, it has a definite upside. The contemporary ADF is significantly more professional and capable than the ADF of four decades ago. With the right kind of leadership and thinking—and *The Chiefs* and other studies<sup>19</sup> produce evidence of such leadership—the ADF has a great opportunity to use the impending hiatus, however short it might be, for the opportunity to reorient and revitalise training and career development in exciting and satisfying ways. However, there is no particular evidence that the Wide Paper recognises this as an aspect that needs explicit attention, nor explicit resourcing for such programs.

As the Service that will be required to exhibit the most flexibility and versatility, the Army is likely to be the most affected in this respect. It in particular needs to look closely at its leadership development programs to ensure that they are as rigorous, challenging, imaginative and integrated as they need to be. In this way, it has a good chance of turning an impending problem into an opportunity. Upgrading the individual and collective requirements for military education and training will provide plenty of challenges for members at all levels, not just for their leaders. However, quality training needs imaginative design and adequate resourcing and, almost as importantly, appropriate guarantees of continuity of resourcing. In this context, one fears that Army training—and perhaps even that for the other two Services—might be a casualty of the inevitable resource hunger of high-tech and expensive capability development programs.

## Conclusions

The intentions enumerated in the 2013 White Paper are timely, appropriate, and sensible, and will no doubt be welcomed by Defence Personnel's senior leadership team. They will be the foundation for continuing with the upward trajectory that people management has followed over the past half generation.

But there is a risk that Defence may overlook the opportunities offered by adopting basic, common sense ways of doing things—within areas such as career management/job rotation, team design and leadership development—as the engine room for organisational improvement, rather than relying on the initiation of further 'programs'.

As with any other institution, the ADF's biggest weaknesses are the shadow side of its very strengths. Pragmatic and practical like the nation it serves, it is often pragmatic to a fault. However, its fundamental strengths stem as

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<sup>19</sup> N. A. Jans, 'Careers in Conflict 21C: the dynamics of the contemporary military career experience', paper presented at the biannual conference of the Inter-University Seminar for Armed Forces & Society, Chicago, October 2009.

always from its people and its people systems. In this sense, imaginative strategic leveraging of personnel and training activities can be used to counter some of the institutional malaise that might arise from the prospect of lower operational tempo and a more nebulous threat. In this way, what many currently see as a problem can be turned to the ADF's advantage. With the right leadership and the right people systems, the ADF will continue to exhibit the qualities and opportunities that will be major sources of capability and member engagement and satisfaction.

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