

Let's talk

Parliament

"It is critical to engage the wider community in our defence decision making processes."

That's the view of David Hawker, Federal Member for Wannon (Victoria) and Chair of a parliamentary inquiry into the suitability of Australia's Army for peace, peacekeeping and war. Mr Hawker was speaking at the opening of a Defence Strategy Debate held in Canberra in June.

The debate, organised by Parliament's Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, attracted many of Australia's leading experts on defence strategy and international security. It was the first opportunity for a public discussion on defence strategy following the release of the Government's public discussion paper on Australia's defence policy.

According to David Hawker, declining recruitment and increased personnel wastage in the defence force suggest that Australians are uncertain about the role of the armed forces in our national life. "The message that we as a nation send to the world through our armed forces must be broadly owned," Mr Hawker said. "It must be a representative and unequivocal expression of the place Australians see themselves holding in the world."

Mr Hawker warned that without additional funding, a number of significant defence capabilities will have to be shelved or scaled back over the next decade. "Parliament, and all Australians, need to make informed choices on the fate of these capabilities," he argued.

One of the key messages coming out of the debate was that defence strategy requires long-term thinking. Hugh White, Deputy Secretary at the Department of Defence, suggested that decisions made in 2000 will only begin to have a real impact in 2005.

"If we make decisions for the next 20 years on the basis of what we think might happen in the next two, we have a very good chance of getting it wrong," Mr White said.

"One of the starting points for this major process of review – the task of looking at the strategic environment – has to be a lot more sophisticated than just saying, 'what happened last week, what will happen next week, what do we expect will happen next year'. You have to have a very disciplined, rigorous and long timeframe."

'Australia wants to be a nation that punches beyond its weight.'

A number of participants in the debate argued that defence policy cannot be considered in isolation from the broader vision that Australia has for itself as a nation. This includes the foreign policy and trade objectives that Australia wants to achieve.

General John Baker, former Chief of the Defence Force, put the view that Australia wants to be a nation that punches beyond



its weight in the international issues that are of concern to it. According to General Baker, this requires a coordinated policy approach that involves the defence forces.

"It is not a question only of defence," General Baker said. "It is a question of coordinating all of our national assets, our foreign and trade policy, our economic development, our Defence Force and our industry to produce a nation which can punch beyond its weight within the region, not just in defence matters but in all matters of global concern."

Others threw a note of caution into the debate, arguing that Australia must recognise the limits to its defence capabilities. Professor Paul Dibb, Head of Strategic and Defence Studies at the Australian National University, commented: "If anything were to be written in letters of gold in any Defence Minister's doorway, irrespective of which party they come from, it should be the following: *There are limits to Australia's defence capacity and influence.*"

The need to be sensitive to the views of regional neighbours was another important message coming out of the debate. Career diplomat Tony Kevin warned: "We will continue to make mistakes if we conduct this defence debate without a perception that there are people listening in our region who actually do think about what we say."

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"This is not a purely domestic debate," Mr Kevin added. "It is an international debate we are engaging in and there is a question which has to be asked: do we simply try to create security through deterrence, creating the appropriate force elements, or at the same time do we try to enhance our sense of mutual assured security with our neighbours through an effective diplomacy?"

While recognising the international implications of defence policy, many participants in the strategy debate stressed the need for greater domestic emphasis on defence policy through more community involvement in defence planning. It was argued that, in this context, community should not just be interpreted to mean defence community.

'There are limits to Australia's defence capacity and influence.'

Stephen Loosley, former Senator and now member of the Government's Community Consultation Team for the defence discussion paper, said that it is important to "acknowledge the contribution to public policy from people with a range of valid views well beyond Canberra and the traditional contributors to the defence debate". Mr Loosley warned that there is a danger in the debate becoming a little insular. "Opening up the process is very healthy," he said.

Debate participants were told that the defence discussion paper released by the Government had tapped into a "wellspring of community interest in defence policy". Within 36 hours of the paper's release there had been some 5,000 requests for the paper to be mailed out to people and some 100,000 hits on the discussion paper web site.

One issue raised by commentators when the discussion paper was first released was that the language in the discussion paper was too simple. In response, Peter Jennings from the White Paper Projects team at Defence argued that one of the important objectives of the exercise was to develop a language that is readily understood by the broader community, so that the community can make its contribution to defence policy.

"We routinely ask people to express a vote at a referendum about complex issues to do with constitutional law," Mr Jennings observed, "yet somehow the view amongst some members of the Australian community is that defence issues are simply too complex to ask Australians about, that even though they are in fact spending \$500 or \$600 a head per year somehow their views should not be asked."

While acknowledging the importance of community involvement, Shadow Defence Minister and Defence Sub-Committee member Stephen Martin warned against over-simplification of the language. He suggested that this may lead to an over-simplification of the concepts involved and may not assist in getting the in-depth and meaningful debate that is required.



The Defence Strategy Debate attracted experts on defence strategy and international security. Pictured left to right: Geoffrey Barker (Australian Financial Review), Hugh White (Department of Defence) and Andrew Johnson (Australian Industry Group).

On this point, Dr Martin said that when the options for future funding of defence are discussed, we should be careful that we do not get caught up in emotive language that over-simplifies the issues. He cautioned against using language which would suggest that there is a choice to be made between "saving lives at the cancer hospital or buying some new kit to defend Australia".

The broad-ranging nature of the debate meant that more issues were raised than resolved. According to Defence Sub-Committee Chair David Hawker, this was not a problem as the Defence Strategy Debate was the first opportunity to discuss defence strategy since the release of the Government's discussion paper. "We cannot expect to get a meaningful result if debate is channelled or constrained at the very start," Mr Hawker said.

As for the relevance of the Defence Strategy Debate for the current Army Inquiry by the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee, Mr Hawker commented: "We have been looking at these issues for a year now. This debate allowed members of the Committee to refine their views about the role of the Army in defence strategy."

The transcript of the Defence Strategy Debate can be obtained from the web site or the secretariat of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (details below). The report on the suitability of the Australian Army for peace, peacekeeping and war is due out in September.

For details

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