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Catchline: ON THE DRY SIDE 412

## The Wrigley Report

*John Hyde*

The Wrigley Report, "The Defence Force and the Community---A Partnership in Australia's Defence", questions Australia's defence force structure in a fundamental way. It is controversial, attracting more than the usual angst from some professional soldiers and presenting politicians with genuinely difficult choices. Yet, because it is all 'too hard', it is likely to vanish within the Department of Defence. That is, political decisions either to accept or reject its findings are not likely to be taken.

Whatever one's views on the substance of this Report, government inaction should not be acceptable. The issue is too important. To prevent the Report from being buried, and to encourage interest from the public and politicians, Sir William Cole, a former Secretary of the Department of Defence, has written a layman's summary and criticism of Wrigley (AIPP Policy Paper No. 19). Cole broadly sympathises with Wrigley's view of defence needs, but the AIPP paper will have done its prime job if it encourages public expression of differing opinion.

The defence of a democracy cannot be left to the soldiers, if only because a parliament and government comprised of defence-laymen must vote the armed services their funds and decide the major issues of war and peace.

Defence occupies some 10% of the Federal budget. But the financial commitments of the 1987 Defence White Paper have not been met and defence spending is falling in real terms---in constant 1984-85 prices, it has fallen from \$6,269 million in 1986-87 to \$5,912 million in 1990-91. Any decline in an education budget would have raised howls from the relevant vested interests and teachers would have gained wide publicity. In contrast, few Australians know that the defence budget has been squeezed and fewer still have protested. We have not seen Miss Jana Wendt smiling sagely while soldiers (and their potential widows) protest defence cuts.

Because of its nature and because defence personnel tend to keep it that way, defence is arcane. As I remember the very few defence debates in the Party Room, our "defence experts" would rabbit on about categories of threat and the relevance of the fire power and range of various defence equipments. However, I never properly understood the relative significance of the various elements of the debate nor, I suspect, did most other MPs. But, before accepting servicemen's criticism of me on that account, I mention my own frustration at the soldiers' failure to grasp what seemed to me to be fundamental economic and fiscal principles. We experience different worlds.

The command structures of an army are alien to people familiar only with consensual structures of a market economy and democracy. Civilians find a command economy, such as must prevail within armed services, appallingly inefficient. Moreover, up to a point, we fear it and the very existence of a professional military caste. That is not to say that we do not, with reason, respect and honour our servicemen who have always respected and protected our society's consensual structures.

There is, however, good reason to bridge the gap between consensual society and the command society of the armed services. Because the defence budget will always be limited, the armed services should have access to the more economically efficient parts of society to make better use of the resources market procedures will provide for them. They also would benefit from a society that better understands defence needs and is prepared to invest in defence. For its part, society at large is best served by an army that mixes with it and shares its values. This, as I see it, is the real background of the Wrigley Report.

Wrigley argues that there are now imbalances in our defence capabilities. We are, he says, incapable of manning the equipment we have in an adequate way. Our defence capabilities are too geared to maintaining an expeditionary force far from home, whereas the forces' prime responsibilities are within our own region and particularly on Australian soil.

He claims that, "[T]he present doctrine of self sufficiency is extravagant in the use of scarce skilled military personnel, costly and inefficient in industrial practices and so poorly positioned to exploit the potential of total national capabilities that they have little capability to expand to deal with a defence emergency".

He recommends:

- | revitalising and increasing the size of the reserves, thereby tapping valuable skills in the civilian community;
- | civilianising many military positions, thereby concentrating the regular forces more on the 'sharp end';

| more contracting out; and

| more planning for the use of national infrastructure.

These changes would give us a defence structure much more akin to those of Western Europe, Canada and the United States. He believes these changes would enhance the forces' capacity, enable it to expand more effectively in the event of big troubles, and save money. Each of these goals is worth the achieving.

Many senior servicemen, on the other hand, claim that Wrigley's proposals are impractical. They claim that warning time is, in fact, unpredictable; there may be no time to mobilise reserves; and that, in any case, reserves of the right quality are not likely to be available and are hard to train. Sending troops to Northern Australia is, they say, akin to mounting an expeditionary force. And with great bitterness they point out that whenever the country has been at war some key unions have gone on strike, depriving troops in the field of the resources that may have saved lives. They therefore want their ordinance in the hands of uniformed personnel. Not being of an economic turn of mind, they don't ask whether, in spite of the strikes, they might have in fact received more supplies in total by using the civilian facilities.

I don't know the answer to the questions raised by Wrigley. The point is that neither does hardly anybody else. We should, but we won't if the Report is buried.

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