

Politics rules and scandals blow up in public but Defence just ignores the indefensible

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The Sydney Morning Herald

16 April 2011

P. 4

It has been a quiet week for Australian soldiers in Afghanistan - which is just as well for Defence HQ might have struggled to focus on an operational incident. Rather than Taliban fighters or foreign militaries, our nation's Defence Force has been focused on seven of its own members and an event that took place less than a kilometre away from the Defence Minister's office.

At the heart of the Australian Defence Force Academy Skype incident are two critical issues that have unearthed a legion of other problems permeating the ADF. Why did the cadet known as Kate feel she needed to seek justice from the media and why did defence mishandle the subsequent media attention? Both questions point to issues of trust in the ADF and Defence Department alike.

Sexual crimes in institutions are regrettably all too frequent. No defence force yet has managed to eradicate unacceptable behaviour. What is critical is that institutions condemn unacceptable behaviour, have resilient systems to ensure justice, and a culture where victims can speak out without fear. Institutional safeguards are more important when both victims and aggressors are likely to be young.

In 2006 a Department of Defence "learning culture inquiry" concluded that the academy did not condone unacceptable behaviour but could improve mutual trust between cadets and instructors. What is clear now is that Kate did not trust the military justice system or her instructors and instead placed her trust in the media. Cultural improvements at the academy were meant to ensure Kate could air her complaint and feel safe. The system failed the moment she made a decision to contact the media.

Vitriol and viciousness have poured from the public on this issue. Within 24 hours of the story breaking, one TV commentator spoke of "an overwhelming culture within the Defence Force that's about bullying minorities". Soldiers risking their lives to protect minorities in Sudan and Afghanistan might well have disagreed.

Letters to the editor referred to soldiers as "up for killing". Bristling tweeters referred to the military as a law unto itself. It seems while Australians respect our soldiers overseas, they do not trust defence at home.

In the first week at the academy cadets learn to prepare uniforms for dress inspection. Toothpicks remove polish from brass buckles, and slouch hats are positioned within a tolerance of millimetres. The message is clear: appearance matters. The most earnest, intelligent, and courageous military cadet is judged first on perception, later on reality. Current public perceptions suggest that defence is unaccountable, opaque, and incapable of investigating itself.

The ADF is small and we seldom see soldiers in our streets. Public perceptions of defence are largely led by engagement with the media - a process that has become increasingly centralised. Almost 100 defence staff in Canberra are charged with managing the media cycle. By contrast only 26 staff work full time on defeating improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan.

There has not been a single departmental media release during the Skype incident. Media inquiries and interview requests have gone unanswered. The ADF's desultory Twitter account has not uttered a single chirp in more than a month; the New Zealand Defence Force tweeted 46 times during March alone. Defence media has been missing in the battle for public opinion.

A recently leaked ministerial submission on defence media notes excessively long clearance processes, "critical failure points", and media inquiries being "handballed" around the organisation without being answered. The ABC's Media Watch recently profiled a media query that took nine days and consultation with 43 staff to deliver an elegantly worded "No comment" to the journalist. There are serious problems in how defence communicates with the public.

In the maelstrom of compassion and condemnation of the past fortnight the voice of uniformed service men and women has been conspicuously absent. In most other defence forces the commandant of the academy would have fronted the media with the facts of the incident readily at his command.

The Minister for Defence, Stephen Smith, has been the only defence voice on this issue and he will come out politically strengthened and popularly respected. He rightly judged that the public needed a quick and clear condemnation and a display of strong leadership. Smith's "opinion" that unrelated disciplinary charges against Kate should be quashed transgressed military justice procedures but demonstrated commonsense.

The politicisation of all defence issues has been a growing trend since the children overboard affair of 2001. When the minister chooses to be the only voice on an incident it means political calculations underpin the entire defence response.

In such a politically charged environment there has been considerable concern from military personnel that their colleague Commodore Bruce Kafer might not receive a fair hearing. They have expressed their concern through social media websites - pledging support for Kafer and calling for the minister to resign.

Securing the scalp of another defence minister will achieve little. A conga-line of ministers has filed through the office over the past decade. It takes years to understand the enormous defence portfolio, let alone shape its direction. Smith, though highly cautious, is entirely capable and has expressed a desire to pursue reform that will go deeper than just penny-pinching. He will announce a new ADF command team in the coming month. Its first task should be to restore public trust in defence.

There are more than 170 male and female officers at the rank of general across the ADF. They should be empowered to talk directly to the media, yet mostly they are not. The minister should be more selective in which defence issues he elevates to the political level. A greater defence commitment to transparency and public engagement is needed.

Defence, with its strange culture, necessary secrecy, and bewildering jargon often seems a mystery to most Australians. Ironically, the Chief of the Defence Force's own action plan for recruitment and retention of women concluded in 2009 that "the reality of ADF life needed to be demystified" to persuade women to join. It seems that Australians know more about the realities of military life in 1915 than in 2011.

We need a more informed public debate on defence issues. The British general Sir John Hackett wrote: "What a society gets in its armed services is exactly what it asks for, no more or less. When a country looks at its fighting forces it is looking in a mirror."

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