

Hugh White

History — and the ground to be made up — stack odds against next minister

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Ambitious ministers should stay away from the phone over the next couple of days, just in case John Howard calls to offer them the Defence portfolio. If history is any guide, minister of defence is not a job you would want if you have your eyes on a bright future in politics. The precedents are very discouraging.

There have been 14 defence ministers over the past 35 years. For all but one of them, it was the last ministerial job they held. From John Gorton, David Fairbairn and Lance Barnard in the early 1970s to each of Howard's four defence ministers — Ian McLachlan, John Moore, Peter Reith and now Robert Hill — the Defence portfolio has been a dead end from which ministerial careers have never recovered.

The sole exception, of course, is Kim Beazley. But he came to the portfolio with something more than ambition: for Beazley, Australia's defence is a lifelong vocation. Such people are rare in Australian politics, and Howard has no-one like that to choose from.

But someone must do the job. So Howard, and whoever it is that finally gets that call, might spend a little time thinking about what the new defence minister should do to avoid the fate of Robert Hill and 12 of his 13 predecessors.

The problem with Defence is that very few ministers have looked to be in control of the sprawling, profligate, complex and highly tribal Defence organisation. Compare it with other portfolios.

There is no doubt that the treasurer runs the Treasury, and the foreign minister runs Foreign Affairs. But who runs Defence? No one really knows but certainly not the minister.

Of course Defence is not like other portfolios. It is too big for the minister to take detailed control. Instead he — or she — must do what so many others before have failed to do, and find a way to take control of the strategic direction of Defence, in both senses of the word.

That means, first, working out what really requires the minister's attention and what does not. The new minister might expect that the most important and demanding role will be to manage the deployments of troops on operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Well, not really. Once the decision to deploy is made — and that's made by cabinet — there is not much for the minister to do in the day-to-day management of operations, in which Australia is after all only a junior partner. He can and should leave that to the experts on the ground.

Instead the minister should focus on the really big, serious issues for which he is primarily responsible, and that involves the long-term development of Australia's armed forces. That means focusing on two big questions: are we building the right kind of forces? And are we getting as much capability as possible for each dollar we spend?

These are the questions on which the new minister of defence will need to exercise real leadership. They are questions which have not been given due ministerial attention in recent years.

Nor does the Defence Headquarters on Russell Hill have easy answers for him to sign off. These are issues on which he will need personally to drive his new portfolio.

He can do that in two simple, but not easy, steps. First, he needs to write a new Defence white paper. It is five years since the last one, and over that time our strategic needs have drifted out of line with our capability plans and funding projections.

Frankly, Hill has left the basis of our strategic policy and the rationale for our force planning rather confused. We are in danger of buying things we do not need and cannot afford, like aircraft-carrier size ships, and of not spending enough on vital future capabilities, like new fighter aircraft and extra infantry battalions.

So there are now some tough choices to be made, and the new minister will have to make them.

Second, the new minister needs to revive the efforts of his Liberal predecessors, Moore and McLachlan, to drive Defence to do business more efficiently. Since Defence was promised a decade of swelling budgets in 2000, the momentum for efficiency reforms has drained away.

It needs to be brought back, not just as a matter of fiscal prudence, but of strategic necessity. To provide Australia with the security it needs over coming decades, we need to squeeze the absolute maximum of effective capability from every dollar we spend.

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