

LETTING ORDINARY KIWIS IN ON DEFENCE¹

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Abstract

This Discussion Paper suggests that defence decision-making should be, and can be, open and accessible. One strand of a more open approach could be the promotion of a robust public debate. Debate is not the same thing as broad public participation. Wider participation is feasible and could include the creation of alternative sources of advice coupled with high official quality analysis. To promote participation and openness the public could be more informed of, and be invited to comment on, policy conclusions as they emerge. Decision-making could be more open with the media granted far greater access to policy deliberations. Briefings could be held for a far wider range of interested parties than is currently practised. The purpose of such an inclusive approach would be to strive for win-win policy outcomes that are credible to interested parties and that have wide public support.

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Introduction

Defence exists to protect the sovereignty of New Zealand and to advance its interests. New Zealand is an open, democratic society. New Zealand defence policy is developed according to the principles and conventions of its democratic system of government. In practice, defence policy making is relatively open in the sense that decisions reached by Cabinet will be made public. The reasoning behind decisions is routinely made available. Parliament debates in open the merits of decisions taken by the Executive. The advice provided to the Cabinet by defence officials is generally made public after decisions are arrived at.

Nonetheless, defence policy advice is generally generated in-house. This process is, in theory, closed to outsiders – though in practice, layers of informal consultation with outsiders is not uncommon. Policy advice generated by defence is the product of extensive inter-departmental consultation (especially with the Treasury, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade). Frank consultation with friends and allies is common (especially with Australia). Generally policy advice is bound by secrecy to encourage frank disclosure of views among officials from different departments and between representatives of different states and their New Zealand counterparts.

While there is no constitutional requirement to consult more widely, to involve the public in decision making, or to test ideas and options in public, and draw from perspectives and approaches that may not be found in formal policy advisory processes – there is an expectation that defence should be more open. Equally, as the British Labour Government's *Strategic Defence Review* of 1998 demonstrated, there are good reasons to involve the public more in decision making. Public ownership of the *Strategic Defence Review* is high. In addition, the wide use of both internal and external sources of expertise and ideas helped create an outcome that was both robustly argued and accessible.

Are such trends too radical for New Zealand? Recent comments by the new Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Neil Walter, and the incoming Secretary of Defence, Graham Fortune, suggest not. Both have both called for the lifting of veils of secrecy around foreign affairs decision making and for a more open debate on defence issues.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to air some ideas about how these trends, and those found in Tony Blair's *Strategic Defence Review*, could be applied to the making of defence policy in New Zealand.

Background: The Defence Debate

The public debate on defence in New Zealand has been going on episodically for some years. The current wave of discussion of defence issues has paralleled internal debates within the executive stimulated by the 1996 *Defence Assessment* that carried through to the 1997 *Defence Review*. Debate accompanied the Parliamentary Select Committee for Foreign Affairs and Defence's 1998/99 Inquiry into *Defence Beyond 2000*. This debate peaked with the Committee's release of its Interim Report into *Defence Beyond 2000* that coincided with the government's announcements of defence equipment purchases in November/ December 1998.

Participants in this debate included interested politicians, newspaper editors, retired military officers and diplomats, small numbers of specialists drawn from think-tanks and the University, the peace movement and small numbers of other people interested in these issues. New Zealand's interpretative style of journalism also stimulated debate.

This debate has carried on through 1999 and intensified during the East Timor crisis. Here, the participants in this debate broadened. Social commentators, a wider range of politicians, well-known public personalities, as well as veterans of the earlier debate all expressed views. In an ironic twist to the earlier debate, veteran peace campaigners, who traditionally oppose defence spending, called on the armed forces to be used to invade East Timor while pro defence advocates recommended caution.

Promoting Public Debate

Public debate on defence in New Zealand could be improved by defence institutions:

- (a) Encouraging and providing active support for public seminars and conferences.
- (b) Improved ease of access to information and decision makers.
- (c) Explanation of how defence works and what it does through the release of briefing papers on all aspects of defence policy, capabilities and operations.
- (d) The production and release of discussion documents on future options.

Public Debate and Public Participation

However, more public debate is not the same thing as increased public participation in defence policy making. More public participation in defence policy making presupposes that it is a good thing. Is it practical and possible? The New Zealand *Defence Review 1997* was carried out with little public consultation. It was, however, the product of an exhaustive interdepartmental, and intra departmental consultation process. Major studies on specialist aspects of defence, including the strategic environment and capability options supported by detailed costings, were undertaken. However, little use was made of in-house expertise not directly engaged in the policy development process. There was also very little consultation undertaken with think tanks, academics, and politicians (other than the executive), pressure groups, and non-governmental organisations.

In contrast, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence tapped into sources of advice that were often overlooked in the Defence Review process. Submissions were provided by academics, pressure groups, former service people and diplomats, and from people who were interested in defence and felt that their views should be taken notice of. However, while the Parliamentary Select Committee did engage in wide consultation, it did not make much use of defence professionals to test its ideas and propositions. Its force structure and capability recommendations were uncosted and often impractical.

However, despite the absence of a rigorous testing process the Parliamentary Select Committee Report in *Defence Beyond 2000* garnered at least as much, if not more, publicity (not always complementary) than the official 1997 Defence Review.

The policy development process for the Parliamentary Select Committee Report of *Defence Beyond 2000* encouraged the public to provide submissions. This gave the impression of public involvement in its processes. However, these submissions were not analysed in detail by professional foreign policy and defence analysts. Many submissions appeared to have been ignored by the Committee and its staffers. The drafting process for the Committee's interim and final reports was carried out in secret with no public input.

Fig. 1
Comparing Reviews/Reports
Openness, Consultation and Analysis

	DR97	SDR98	FADAT99 ²
Consultation			
Defence formal	high	high	nil
Defence informal	low	high	low
Allies	high	high	nil
Public Formal			
Expert	uneven	high	low
General	low	high	high
In-house Ideas	low	high	low
Openness	low	high	low
Costing Analysis	high	high	nil
Research/Testing	high	high	nil
Media Coverage	high	high	high
Public Ownership	low/medium	high	low/medium

Options for Greater Public Participation

Have the attempts at public consultation been doomed to failure? The experience of Tony Blair's *Strategic Defence Review 1998* suggests not. This review was remarkable in that it managed to combine rigorous professional analysis with a high level of genuine public consultation. The *Strategic Defence Review* opened sources of alternative advice (for instance, to think-tanks, specialists, academics and the public), whilst keeping the defence bureaucracy on-side. It generated almost universally positive media coverage and succeeded in creating a deep level of public ownership for the *Strategic Defence Review's* recommendations.

How was this achieved? What lessons may there be for New Zealand? The most important lesson is that an official review process can be harnessed as an instrument of public consultation, open decision making and quality professional analysis. Perhaps the following steps could be considered if a more open style of defence review was undertaken, with a review process being used to:

- (a) Stimulate public discussion and public involvement through the publication of discussion papers on key defence issues. Public responses could be encouraged. These responses could then be combed for good ideas and tested for practicality.
- (b) Open channels for alternative sources of advice.

- (c) Undertake the high quality analysis crucial to robust and credible policy outcomes. This applies as much to policy themes that are out sourced as to those generated in-house. This analysis should be undertaken by officials and made public.
- (d) Inform and test emerging conclusions in open seminars for members of parliament from all parties, academics, representatives of non-governmental organisations as well as ministers and their officials.
- (e) Open decision making by providing access for journalists to decision makers as policy options emerge. Journalists should be invited to observe the meetings where policy is developed and tested.
- (f) Get cabinet, parliament, allies and friends, the wider defence community, and the public on side through regular liaison and briefings.
- (g) Produce a final report that is accessible, robustly argued and substantiated. The layered reporting style of the *Strategic Defence Review* provides a model worth emulating. Three layers of material were produced: the first, a 60 page main Report, the second, with detailed supporting essays, and the third, comprising detailed fact sheets³. This model could be improved by including an analysis of alternative options (including their limitations) that were not adopted in full but may have inspired ideas in the main report.

Systems, Structures and Culture

Such an approach to the development of defence policy would have significant implications for process and the prevailing policy culture both, for the executive and for defence institutions. The main implications for process would be the need for managing public consultation and openness. Highly developed systems and structures are in place to deal with intra departmental consultation. This suggests that defence itself should manage any consultative mechanism. Defence has the experience in managing consultation. It is also important for any consultative mechanism to be located within defence to ensure defence is on side. Something like a Defence Office of Consultation, led by a senior manager with a talent for understanding in-house processes, what defence does, and how to organise consultative linkages with the public, could be established.

More difficult would be the job of changing an in-house culture not used to taking the public into its confidence as policy is being developed. But this could be achieved through leadership. Such an approach would have significant implications for very senior officers and officials who would find new demands on their time. Perhaps this could be managed through a greater devolution of the day to day responsibility for developing the detail of policy.

Officials would also need to get used to exchanging views frankly in the public eye and to having their opinions scrutinised and criticised before they are fully developed.

Concluding Remarks

There are good reasons for making defence policy more open. Defence exists to serve the society that nourishes it. Ironically that nourishment is usually provided at levels that are not sufficient to fully sustain defence. Part of this reason is because defence is a complex business

and hard to understand. Opening defence is the right thing to do in an open society, but it is also a way of getting people on side by explaining how defence works. Wide support is most likely to come from a public that feels that defence exists for them and will take on board the things that they feel are important.

END NOTES

¹ Headline introducing an interview by Hank Schouten with the new Secretary of Defence Graham Fortune *Evening Post*; 4 October 1999.

² DR97=NZ Defence Review 1997, SRD98=British Strategic Defence Review 1998, FADAT99=NZ Parliamentary Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Select Committee Report on Defence Beyond 2000.

³ The main report of British Strategic Defence Review 1998 includes chapters on the strategic approach to defence, security priorities in a changing world, defence missions and tasks, deterrence and disarmament, the future shape of the forces, a policy for people, equipment, smart procurement, defence support, resources, and a conclusion outlining modern forces for the modern world. Supporting essays published separately cover each of these issues in more depth and provides background material. The fact sheets disclose detailed information of military equipment, doctrine and so on.