WESTERN AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 18 SEPTEMBER 2007

THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

BY

LIEUTENANT GENERAL JOHN SANDERSON, AC
SPECIAL ADVISER ON INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

This is an unusual subject you must admit. In theory there is no role for the Military in Indigenous Affairs in contemporary society. Even the colonial militias in pre-Federation times were established to defend the colonies against external enemies, securing the major strategic nodal points on behalf of the Crown and the Empire. Expeditionary forces were generated out of these on a voluntary basis to fight wars against Indigenous people in the Sudan and New Zealand, and against the Boers in South Africa. Unlike the Indian wars on the frontiers of the United States, most problems with the Indigenous people in Australia, but not all, were handled by the police. In Western Australia, in a moment of desperation, Governor Stirling took the locally raised militia down to the Peel Region to teach a lesson to the Binjarub people who were threatening the establishment of freehold settlements on their land.

Post federation, it was quite clear that defence of the nation and the military forces established under the Constitution and Federal legislation were the responsibility of the Commonwealth. Unlike the United States, there were no national guards established by the states for internal use against emergencies like slave uprisings and disgruntled Indians. In Australia, if the States required support from the Defence forces in an emergency that support was to be provided by the Commonwealth Government under national command and control arrangements.

Armed forces could only be provided in the event of a declared national emergency authorised on request by the Governor General. The fundamental principle was to avoid the Executive using the Services against their own people – an essential part of the checks and balances of our liberal democratic society.

For the first half century of Federation there was no Regular Army, even though the nation launched massive expeditionary forces to fight for the Empire. The 1st and 2nd AIFs were raised on a voluntary basis to fight overseas, while the part time militia continued to defend the homeland around fortified ports held by permanent artillery and engineer units. The only Australian manoeuvre unit that was raised in this period was the Darwin Mobile Force that had to be raised in 1938 as an Artillery unit because that was all the legislation would allow. It was only when Japanese invasion threatened that the full time mobilisation of the militia became acceptable to the Australian people. Militia manoeuvre units were deployed overseas to the surrounding region to secure the nation and cover the redeployment of the AIF.

Indigenous people had volunteered for these expeditionary forces in both world wars. They were more likely to be acceptable in the AIF than the militia, which continued to have a

regional and less comfortable flavour. They enjoyed none of the post conflict benefits of their white comrades who served in either force.

The Second World War also saw for the first time the raising of a specific Indigenous unit for the defence of the homeland with the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion helping to defend bases in the Strait – at a third of the salary of non Indigenous soldiers – until they went on strike that is. Incidentally some of these soldiers did patrol into Dutch New Guinea – with white officers of course.

None of these Indigenous soldiers were Australian citizens and, while some of them enjoyed limited rights, they were not entitled to any of the benefits that accrued to those returning servicemen and women who enjoyed the right to vote in Australian elections. That right was not to come until the referendum of 1967 – an event whose fortieth anniversary we have celebrated with some fanfare this year.

The Second World War created a new reality in Australian defence, one in which it had to carry a share of the ongoing security responsibility of the alliances that sprang up to contain the surge of communism in the independence movements of former European colonies and to garrison the territories of conquered nations. For the first time a full time Australian Regular Army was raised by legislation in 1947 with an immediate commitment a deployable brigade of three infantry battalions.

Almost immediately, this Regular Army was deployed out of Japan to fight in the Korean War under a United Nations flag. From that moment on the Regular battalions and their supporting troops were to be engaged overseas in a series of wars that were to last up to 1972. The Citizens Military Force that had replaced the old militia was manned to a large extent by a universal national service scheme that conscripted all eighteen-year-old males for 90 days fulltime training and ongoing service in the CMF. This scheme was terminated in 1959. In 1964 a new scheme based on conscripting a number of 20 year olds for two years full time service on the basis of a lottery was commenced to man an expanding Regular Army for deployment to South East Asia.

Indigenous people could volunteer for this service, and they did, but, those regarded as non-citizens could not be conscripted. After 1967 they were included in the Census and began to appear on the electoral rolls, thus becoming eligible for call up. Interestingly, about the time that Aboriginal people began to be thrown off the pastoral properties in response to their newfound entitlements to higher pay, the Australian Defence Force came home from its Asian wars to concentrate on the defence of Australia. President Nixon had told us in 1969 that we had to look after our own affairs in our own region because the Americans were not going to get involved in any more Vietnams.

Aboriginals and the Army therefore, both found themselves hanging around northern regional centres looking for a new role in life. In 1974, for example, I was sent to the Northern Territory and the Kimberley Regions to write a book and an exercise to start the General Staff thing about defence of the North. The air and naval defence of the sea-air gap saw the beginning of a new series of air and naval bases in the west and North, and a new

surveillance and command and control arrangement to go with them. But the land task was acknowledged as distinctly difficult because of the vast distances entailed. How did you defend the strategic bases against the sorts of threats that could evade the area surveillance systems?

We wrestled with the sorts of units and command arrangements that could accept this challenge and gradually accepted that a combination of regional surveillance units based on local people, regular units based in the North, and units from the south that could be brought into position as required would be the best solution.

It was agreed that we would recruit Indigenous people into the regional surveillance units, using their local knowledge and networks, and training them in communication and military skills so that they could both observe and report, as well as work with units deployed from the South into their country.

Thus began Norforce – the Northwest Mobile Force that has as its area of operations all the Northern Territory and the Kimberley Region. I was Director of Plans for Army during the time this unit was being raised. We made many mistakes of a cultural nature at first. It wasn't until we began to consult Aboriginal leaders and communities and share the responsibility for recruiting and retaining the Force that we began to get some stability in the Indigenous contribution. This idea of a partnership with communities was an important lesson that was to hold the Army in good stead in later activities.

There are two other regional surveillance units that were raised after Norforce – one in the Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait, and another in the Pilbara. The first of these has been reasonably successful in recruiting Indigenous people, particularly in the Torres Strait where it has been possible to draw on the islander's pride in their history of previous military contributions. There is no Indigenous contribution to the Pilbara Regiment.

Since we established these military units and dispositions in the 1980s and early 1990s Government changed and our philosophy of government changed. What caused this?

In the summer of 1991, fresh from the triumph of the Cold War and armed to the teeth with the military technology that was the product of nearly half a century of intense preparation for World War III, the United States of America and its allies invaded Iraq in a United Nations sanctioned operation to free Kuwait.

The ease and almost instantaneous success of this strategic riposte to Sadam Hussein's attempt to strengthen his position in the Middle East added to the sense of triumph inspired in the West by the coming down of the Berlin Wall. At the political level, it reinforced the conviction that free market forces provided the vehicle for a prosperous and peaceful future, while enhancing the belief that the military could be used in a discriminating manner to overcome any blockages to the expanding reality of globalisation.

Having had deep concerns about their future after 1989, Western military forces embraced this new role with alacrity, and many elements that had previously been prepared for

absolute war were now faced with transition to the more difficult, intrusive and much more sensitive tasks associated with nation building and the management of violence.

A decade of fumbling their way into this new future provided many lessons about the types of operations and relationships that could provide success in these endeavours. Importantly, the complexity of the environments let loose by the end of the Cold War demanded a breaking down of the pre-existing boundaries between military and civilian components and saw the beginning of a new era of military civilian cooperation.

The Australian military proved to be among the most adept in this new form of engagement and quickly picked up experience in places such as Cambodia, Somalia, Timor L'Este, and the Solomon Islands. In the process, they acquired the confidence of a grateful Government that began to accept military intervention as a panacea for what would otherwise be seen as failures of diplomacy, foreign aid and social policy.

The interventions of the military forces of other nations were less successful and were more often marked by the threat or actual use of force. The pervasive use of financial resources, advisers, technology and expeditionary forces to reinforce regimes that were seen as supportive of Western strategic and economic interests created enemies among those opposed to the status quo in the countries concerned.

Eventually, the promise of a peaceful new world order that had emerged in the last decade of the Twentieth Century was challenged by the terrorist attack on the United States of America in September 2001 and began to dissipate in the events that followed. The failures so far in the responses to these emerging challenges are lifting the lid on some very serious problems associated with Western strategy – or lack of strategy as the case may be. In many ways they are repeated in our crisis management approach to problems in Australia's region – in East Timor and the Solomon Islands for example.

These problems raise questions associated with the efficacy of using the military as a shortcut to treat the symptoms of dysfunctional relationships rather than addressing their fundamental causes. They draw into focus once again the mechanisms needed to balance interests in the nation state and emphasise the difficulty of managing relationships between states and cultures in an increasingly connected world.

Importantly, these failures defy the simplicity of the economic rationalist belief that the market will provide all the solutions to the complexity of a rapidly changing environment. True, this commitment to the idea of a free market providing the pathway to international peace and prosperity has been reinforced by the relative economic success of the post Cold War world. Indeed, the global economy has burgeoned beyond even the most optimistic expectations over the past two decades. Freeing the movement of capital has weakened resistance to the free movement of labour and the removal of trade barriers, changing social relationships within all nations – rich and poor. There has been a massive worldwide increase in the numbers of the middle classes, most of whom share a commitment to constant economic growth and the necessary consumption of the products of modern technology that goes with it.

At the same time, this commitment to economic growth has heightened the threat to cultural diversity, as conformity with the needs of the market is demanded by those who have established the most powerful positions within it. Governments have less say in the strategic direction of their countries, while the non-government sector is relied on more and more to deliver services to citizens. Fears of inflationary increases in the cost of money and labour are compounded by massive increases in private debt. Jobs are transferred offshore to less regulated regions where labour costs are lower.

This has taken many western economies into unknown territory. Governments in liberal democratic countries have been drawn into the contradictory mode of divesting themselves of social and infrastructure liabilities for the state, in keeping with needs of the market, while taking coercive action to ensure stability and conformity.

The complexity inherent in this contradiction is played out almost daily in the form of the growth of laws and regulations restricting established civil liberties, the growth of security mechanisms, both public and private, and the feeding of the fear and greed agenda through the growing appetite of the media for sensational and salacious material. Those strategists behind the resistance to western global ascendency have proven to be adept at stoking these fires and fears through the use of threats and terrorism of the most visceral kind.

Australia's benign circumstances should combine to make the nation more generous and less prone to these fears. It is the only nation in the history of humankind that has united an entire continent under one system of government. It has an abundance of the land and raw materials required to power an inclusive and creative society. The foundations of its education system are liberal and embracing. Its geography probably makes it the most secure nation on Earth, while its near neighbours display little reputation for, or signs of, external aggression.

Despite these enduring characteristics, Australia has shown itself to be most susceptible to losing its potential to provide leadership in its region through both fear and loss of control over its strategic policy. Its response to changing circumstances in its immediate neighbourhood has been consistently reactive rather than creative, and its habit of resorting to crisis management rather than deep strategic commitment has established an over reliance on the military. In turn, the growing demands of this approach have reinforced the assessment that Australia must cast its lot with the United States of America regardless of where that course might take it, eroding its influence as a broker in regional affairs and further increasing its reliance on its armed forces.

Clearly, this sort of burgeoning complexity is not sustainable. Circumstances do not improve by treating symptoms rather than causes. It is often the case that such an approach simply adds to the complexity until things collapse into a new paradigm. The addition of new or unforseen factors such as climate change may even hasten this shift as populations become stressed or diverted by the demands of survival.

In many ways, Australia's Indigenous populations have been and continue to be, the victims of a similar coercive market forces approach. The nation's failure to come to terms with the responsibilities of its inheritance of an entire continent has resulted in the lack of respect for and abuse of the original peoples and their cultures. This failure is not only reflected in the dysfunctional circumstances of many Aboriginal communities, but is also evidenced in the severely stressed state of the continent's unique ecology.

The importance to us all of keeping the Indigenous cultures that are left should have dawned long ago. The horrific consequences of losing them and living as aliens in this land should draw us towards a totally different strategy to the one that has brought us to the present processes of crisis management. Indeed, it is difficult to see how we can survive if we don't find some way of being drawn back and reconnecting with the country. Unfortunately, the current strategy, if there is one, shows all the signs of remaining that of assimilation – the widely held view that the only hope for Indigenous people is to become like us, living in urban concentrations, having a job, having debt and equity and joining the market on these terms. The market forces approach demands that we solve this problem once and for all, turning Aboriginal people into productive units and getting them off the debit side of the ledger – one way or the other.

Such an assimilation approach is most unlikely to work – as much because it is once again inflicted on Indigenous people rather than generated by them. It is founded on an ideology that may eventually turn out to be hotly contested at its source anyway. This is not to suggest that Indigenous people should not have all the opportunities to share in the benefits of national wealth and social development. It is simply that they have much more to bring to the table if they are empowered on the basis of their own culture rather than continuing in the needs based mendicant state, which is the source of much dysfunction.

Land and culture are the source of this empowerment. A strategy that fails to reflect this fundamental fact can be expected to generate more of the alienation and passive resistance that is reflected in those appalling prison and health statistics applying to Indigenous people that we all have increasing familiarity with.

If the military has a role in helping Indigenous people to take control of their own destiny it has to be in this spirit of reconciliation, standing alongside them and providing assistance in restoring their pride and self-esteem. Such an approach was behind the Army Projects in Aboriginal Communities, begun when I was Chief of Army, but now suspended because the Engineers involved are doing the same work in Afghanistan.

As I have said, this is not the normal role of armed forces in liberal democratic nation states, which should have many other options to meet this need. Within Australia, it has been rare until quite recent times, when the frequency of their engagement has grown exponentially. Whether this reflects a genuine increase in the number of emergencies the nation faces or a growing tendency on the part of Government to resort to the use of expeditionary forces within Australia's territorial boundaries deserves serious analysis.

True reconciliation remains the key to these issues that have distracted and confused the nation in recent times. The only answer to the complex problems of moving forward in a rapidly changing environment is to choose the paths together. This form of reconciliation requires a constant process – one of continuous exchange as the circumstances change - a partnership based on equality and respect. So far, governments, both state/territory and Commonwealth, have failed to build the trust and commitment that such partnerships demand.

© Lieutenant General John Sanderson, AC, 18 September 2007