

Afghanistan: OK to be partisan

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For a long time in Australia discussion of military issues has been haunted by the legacies of the Vietnam era. Commentators and politicians alike tread carefully when they critically discuss defence issues, lest they appear to be criticising Australian troops. In our federal parliament this has meant that the military has become a bipartisan issue — largely ignored unless something particularly tragic or scandalous occurs.

In reality bipartisanship has often been a co-word for laziness in Australian military policy. The Defence Department employs over 70,000 Australians and will spend more than \$26.8 billion this financial year. That's the fifth biggest chunk of money in the federal budget and it deserves just as much public and parliamentary scrutiny as spending on health and education.

In the past weeks both the prime minister and opposition leader have shown the military is neither their area of expertise, nor their area of interest. They've both gotten away with political squirming on Defence issues that wouldn't have been allowed in any other portfolio.

For Julia Gillard and Stephen Smith the Chief of the Defence Force, Angus Houston, is their Maginot Line. Watch closely in the parliamentary debate this week just how often the government uses Houston's advice to buttress their Afghan policy.

We wouldn't allow the government to hide behind the Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship on its people smuggling policy in quite the same way. Yet in military matters, we tolerate government MPs who don't seem to know the difference between a bayonet and a bain-marie, and who think drones are only found in the Senate.

It's not that long ago that former defence minister Joel Fitzgibbon was storming NATO conferences in Europe demanding our allies offer up more troops for the Afghan war. There was no hiding behind the Chief of Defence Force then, nor should there be now. This is the government's policy on Afghanistan and they need to own and justify it fully.

The Coalition has struggled much more in articulating a coherent policy on our military involvement in Afghanistan. The decision to lock in a Defence policy based on an anonymous email sent by a soldier was ill considered. David Johnston talks to lots of people in the military, yet his policies often struggle to rise beyond the viewpoint of the private soldier. As a result, there is no strategic opposition policy on military matters — least of all Afghanistan.

Tentative forays by Tony Abbott into Afghanistan policy are now referred to as "considerations" for government, not alternative policy. The Coalition doesn't offer "considerations" on the NBN, ETS, or BER. It should offer carefully formulated alternative policy on all our military matters — including Afghanistan.

Soldiers both here and abroad are completely comfortable with robust debate on military matters. But they want it to be informed and considered. Our soldiers need to be non-partisan professionals — able to carry out the wishes of the government of the day, whatever its political persuasion.

Our politicians though are bound to contest each other in our Westminster style parliament. From this contest should emerge the best policy ideas, subject to as much public scrutiny as possible. There's nothing wrong with politicians being partisan on military matters — in fact we require them to be.

All of the parliamentarians who speak on Afghanistan this week will support our soldiers, no matter what they think of our involvement in the war. Let's hope they enter the debate equipped with a detailed knowledge of both the military and Afghanistan, and a willingness to aggressively seek out the best Defence policy for Australia.

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