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A departmental Secretary's perspective

Ric Smith

I should begin with two caveats. First, when I left Defence after four and a bit years as Secretary, I did not take with me a diary or any papers of consequence, and nor did I keep any from my time as Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. So what follows is a hybrid of personal memory, with all its faults, and from reading some of the writings, a few conversations with others who were engaged and, in the case of Afghanistan, at least some work I did for Defence—and ultimately for the National Security Committee of Cabinet—on the lessons to be learned from our ‘whole-of-government’ mission in Afghanistan.

Second, and more important, while I appreciate the reasons we are addressing the Iraq and Afghan conflicts together, we should not forget how different they were. The justifications for each, the international structures around them, the nature of their endorsement by the United Nations and their standing in international law, the way they were fought, the issues we were dealing with on the ground, and domestic or popular perceptions are unique. In short, one was a conflict fought in the context of what was then being described as the ‘Global War on Terror’, and the other was a war against a state; that is, the state of Iraq. And one—Iraq—was arguably more a war of choice than the other.

There is a risk in works of this kind that we will find ourselves over-analysing, and thereby complicating unduly, our accounts of significant events. In fact, government decision-making in most fields is usually

best understood in its simplest forms. For good or ill, what you see from government in these areas these days is mostly what you get, and that was so in the case of the original decisions about Afghanistan and Iraq.

Afghanistan I

Taking these in sequence, the first was of course the decision announced on 17 October 2001 to deploy a force to Afghanistan. For me, two points stand out about that decision and the way it was announced. The first is that it was placed squarely in the context of what the government saw as Australia's commitment to the United States under the ANZUS Treaty, which of course had been invoked in the wake of 9/11. The decision was straightforward, and enjoyed wide public support.

The second point is this: in announcing the decision, the Prime Minister emphasised its limited nature, and referred to Afghanistan only once in a one-and-a-half-page statement—to say that the F/A-18 Hornet fighter aircraft being deployed would not operate in Afghanistan.¹ In other words, the US alliance apart, the mission was primarily about terrorism, not Afghanistan.

In subsequent media comments, the Prime Minister and ministers emphasised that our commitment would remain limited in scope and time. For instance, Foreign Minister Downer said:

We don't want to get ... bogged down in Afghanistan. We don't want Australian troops to be part of managing and running Afghanistan for the next five or six years ... We don't really have a great desire to get into the long-term management of Afghanistan.²

In part, statements of this kind reflected an abiding, in-principle reluctance to be drawn into long-term or open-ended roles in this distant theatre and, in this sense, foreshadowed the initial positions we were to take a year later about post-conflict roles in Iraq. The government's preferred approach in both cases was captured in John Howard's later

1 Prime Minister the Hon. J. Howard MP, 'Australian troops to be deployed to Afghanistan', statement, 17 October 2001.

2 P. Bongiorno, interview with Foreign Minister the Hon. A. Downer MP, 'Meet the Press', Network 10, 18 November 2001.

statement that 'the right combination was to provide sharp-edged forces for a limited period of time during the hot part but not get bogged down in long drawn-out peace-keeping operations'.³

But in my view, Downer's remarks were also early signs of an underlying and persistent wariness about the Afghanistan project, reflecting a keen sense of the risks that Afghanistan posed. I will return to this point, but suffice for now to note that, in this event, these concerns not to be dragged into Afghanistan beyond the initial assault on terrorist positions were overridden as the conflict unfolded, as they were in Iraq.

After a year in Afghanistan as part of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, the government was satisfied with what we had done and, consistent with its preferred approach, withdrew the deployment. In announcing this on 20 November 2002, Defence Minister Hill noted that 'the focus of the operations has moved towards supporting the reconstruction of Afghanistan';⁴ *ipso facto*, we were no longer involved. And so from April 2003 to August 2005, we had only two ADF officers in country: one in a liaison position with United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the other in the Mine Action Coordination Centre.

Iraq

By the time we withdrew from this first mission from Afghanistan, planning for a possible deployment to Iraq was well in hand. I did not take up duty as Secretary until 18 November 2002, but when I did, the first two orders of business were a briefing on the status of our contingency planning for Iraq and the announcement (two days later) of our withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The government had not by then made a decision to go to war in Iraq. It can be argued that this was only a technical matter and that the decision had effectively been made. But in fact many in government still hoped that Saddam Hussein would submit on the issue of WMD and that war would

3 Quoted in Middleton, *An Unwinnable War*, p. 38.

4 Senator the Hon. R. Hill, Minister for Defence, 'Australian special forces to return from Afghanistan', media release, MIN 664/02, 20 November 2002.

be avoided at the last moment. There was still a view, shared with the UK Government, and indeed with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, that we should have tried to put another UN Security Council resolution in place.

In the event that that was not achieved, the ADF leadership was concerned with being well positioned so that if the government made a decision to commit to conflict, we would not be caught with our forces unprepared or in a long transit. The government accepted this view.

In a frantic period, two things stood out for me. The first was the great care that the CDF and the service chiefs were giving to the selection of the capabilities we would offer and to the personnel who would lead in the field. The capabilities would be niche, but they had to be in areas where their presence would matter and be noticed. The second was the intense effort, led by Defence but with the close involvement of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), to ensure access to basing and support facilities in the Gulf—a very successful effort, of course.

As to why we became involved in the war, what you saw was what you got. In a taxonomy that I heard for the first time only recently from a very senior figure in the government at the time, there was a justification for the war and a reason for our involvement in it. The justification was Iraq's possession of WMD and the risks following from that, including the risk of terrorist groups gaining access to them, and Iraq's refusal to comply with UN Security Council resolutions in respect of the WMDs. And the reason for our commitment was the policy imperative that the government saw to support our US ally.

The justification of course was to prove flawed, and the process around it exposed serious failings both in the US-led intelligence community and at the higher policy level in Washington, which led for instance to Colin Powell's UN speech of 5 February 2003 in which he confidently stated that Hussein possessed WMDs. This was disillusioning for many of those involved, not least for Powell himself, and in the longer term embarrassing for others, in particular British Prime Minister Tony Blair and, arguably, to a lesser extent for our own government.

But for the Bush administration as a whole it might not have mattered so much at the time because other considerations were in play. As our ambassador in Washington, Michael Thawley, had told John Howard at the time, the 9/11 attack had ensured that 'Iraq would be back on the

agenda for the Americans'.⁵ And in addition to retribution, US policy came to embrace regime change and democratisation as well as the WMD issue.

In my view, this was not the case for Australia. As I recall, neither formally nor in any informal discussions did the Howard Government's deliberations embrace regime change as an objective in itself, evil as Saddam was seen to be. 'Democratisation' for its own sake was certainly not on our agenda, and any references to terrorism related not to 9/11 but rather to the fear that WMDs might find their way from Iraq into the hands of terrorist organisations.

As Allan Gyngell puts it in his recently published, and excellent, history of Australian foreign policy, Howard's speeches were 'absent the moral universalism which informed Bush's language when he spoke to the American people'.⁶ In my recollection, this was true of discourse among ministers, which was typically functional and prosaic.

Nor incidentally did I see or hear any reference to oil as a reason for us to be in the Middle East—at least not until the then Defence Minister Brendan Nelson made a comment in 2006 suggesting an oil motive, on which he was quickly corrected. The fact is that, as students of the Middle East will know, the United States' obsession with the region goes back way beyond oil—and incidentally way before Israel. Anyway, oil supplies were not at risk under Saddam Hussein.

In short, there was no conspiracy in Australian policy. Some critics have difficulty accepting this, but the fact is that, right or wrong, for the Australian Government the WMD issue was the sole justification for the war, and at the time a sufficient one. Although the Defence Intelligence Organisation had noted some doubts about the claims made by Secretary Powell in his UN speech, it took time for the government to be convinced that there were no WMDs. As late as mid-April 2003, when the Defence Minister, CDF and I were preparing to go to Iraq, we were vaccinated against anthrax, as our troops had been, and we had professional teams in the field continuing the search long after hostilities concluded.

5 J. Howard, *Lazarus Rising: A Personal and Political Autobiography*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2010, p. 425.

6 A. Gyngell, *Fear of Abandonment: Australia and the World Since 1942*, La Trobe University Press, Melbourne, 2017, p. 259.

Mistaken as that justification turned out to be, it does not follow that the reason for our involvement was invalid. We did provide support for our alliance partner. If there is argument on this matter, it relates more to what we actually did in Iraq. There is a view, fashionable among some in the ADF, that we did not do enough to win much kudos from the US armed forces, and indeed one very senior officer has claimed to me that our efforts actually attracted derision from his American counterparts. The credibility of our forces is always important, but it would surprise me if anyone was suggesting that the seriousness of our commitment should be measured in casualties.

Yes, our force for what was called Operation FALCONER was structured carefully for impact. It might well be that concerns were expressed in some quarters about the adequacy of our post-war roles. It would be wrong, however, to underestimate the value of what the SAS units did in western Iraq, especially in ensuring that no missiles could be launched at Israel, and the RAN's work in the Al-Faw Peninsula, in the initial stages of the war.

More importantly, the government's purpose was not to impress the American military commanders in the field—rather, it was to signal policy and political support for the Bush administration in a world in which it had few friends. And sustaining that support in the face of widespread international criticism at home and abroad added to the value of that support in Washington. In this regard, the Howard Government could argue that its objectives were met, whatever the view of American military commanders in the field, and I would expect that this remains John Howard's view.

Through all of this there is one other consistent policy factor that proved a mitigating factor against a larger Australian contribution to the coalition in Iraq. While the Australian Government was always conscious that these Middle East operations were important to Australia's policy interests, there were potential challenges closer to home that could at any time demand a response from the ADF and for which significant force elements needed to be kept available.

This was not mere rhetoric. During Australia's time in Afghanistan and Iraq, additional deployments had to be made to East Timor and to Solomon Islands. This was not a matter of 'defence of Australia'; rather,

it was well-founded prudence and, as Howard used to say, the most important contribution Australia could make to the Alliance would be to do what was needed in Australia's own region.

It was not only in relation to the WMD intelligence issue that the US system was found wanting. The absence of a credible post-victory plan—a plan for 'phase 4', as the Americans called it—was hardly less a contribution to the huge problem that Iraq became, not least by leaving the way open to some poor—and poorly made—decisions about 'de-Ba'athification' and the disbandment of the Iraqi army.

While Australian planners did not foresee the intelligence failure, there were concerns from the outset about the absence of a serious plan for 'phase 4'. Australian officers persisted in expressing these concerns up to the commencement of the war. I recall an especially frustrating meeting in Washington in late January 2003, to which we sent Canberra-based officers and officials from DFAT, AusAID and Defence. The United Kingdom, which of course had a considerably greater stake in the conflict than we had, pushed even harder but with no more success, and the State Department shared these concerns. In short, in Washington, the Pentagon—and Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in particular—had run away with the game.

That said, it is worth recalling that while we were making known our concerns about the post-conflict situation, the Prime Minister and ministers were also making clear that Australia did not wish to be involved in any post-war occupation of Iraq beyond humanitarian aid, and possibly some military specialists. While our policy position in this regard might have been different had there been a well-developed post-war plan, in the absence of one it was thus consistent with the approach we had taken to Afghanistan—and proved no more enduring.

And so it was that we withdrew most of the force committed to Operation FALCONER from Iraq when the major hostilities ended in 2003. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom and Poland, we did not commit forces to post-war reconstruction until early 2005. In 2005, the government announced the deployment to Al Muthanna Province in what was called an 'Overwatch' role, which came to include training Iraqi forces as well. My own recollection of this is that while the United States

wanted us more engaged, it was in the end the British who leaned hardest, Al Muthanna being in the area of Iraq in which they were leading in the name of the Multi-National Division (South East) based in Basra.

Most of our remaining forces were withdrawn by June 2008 following the election of the Rudd Government in December 2007. By that time, I was no longer in government, but my sense was that while the Labor Party policy on withdrawal was unequivocal, Rudd tried to cushion the impact in Washington by taking some time over the decision, leaving at least some elements behind—and moving on to do more in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan II

In the meantime, a decision had been taken in mid-2005 to return to Afghanistan. This decision was taken not long after the government decided to take on the new role in Al Muthanna, but it was clearly a much bigger decision than the Al Muthanna decision, and it had very much greater implications.

There were two elements to the decision the Prime Minister announced on 13 July 2005. The first was about the deployment of a Special Forces Task Group to undertake a ‘security task very similar to the task that was undertaken by an SAS taskforce that went in 2001’. The second was confirmation that the government was considering ‘the possibility of sending a Provincial Reconstruction Team [PRT] to Afghanistan’.⁷

I think it is on the public record that the Defence Minister’s initial proposal was for a contribution to a PRT. The decision that the Prime Minister announced was again more cautious, focusing on a renewed special forces deployment and only foreshadowing a possible PRT contribution.

There has been speculation about whether we had come under ‘pressure’ from Washington to recommit to Afghanistan. This is not my recollection, at least as far as the policy and political levels of government were concerned.

It is worth reflecting in this regard on another aspect of the Prime Minister’s announcement of 13 July 2005. He said that Australia had:

7 Prime Minister the Hon. John Howard MP, ‘Troop deployment to Afghanistan’, press conference transcript, 13 July 2005.

received requests, at the military level, from both the United States and others and also the Government of Afghanistan and we have therefore decided in order to support the efforts of others to support in turn the Government of Afghanistan to despatch ... some 150 personnel ...⁸

The emphasis on the requests having been made at the 'military level' is consistent with my recollection about the absence of pressure at the political level. The reference to our 'supporting the efforts of others' reflects the importance attached to our being part of the coalition—by then a proxy term for the alliance—and at the same time suggests again a degree of wariness about the whole project.

We had of course been watching the changing picture in Afghanistan since 2002 closely, and were very much aware that the role of the coalition there—by 2005 called the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)—had changed significantly and was taking on more 'pacification' or 'stabilisation' functions. Above all, the coalition had come under NATO leadership (formally at least) and grown very considerably to include roles for Canada and New Zealand, among many others.

There was therefore a sense among senior ministers that there was a legitimate and important international effort underway, backed unequivocally by UN Security Council resolutions, and that our non-involvement sat oddly with the interests we shared with most coalition members and with our traditional view of Australia's place in the world. As well at that time, there was, as a matter of policy, great interest at the political level and among the ADF leadership in getting closer to NATO.⁹ Indeed, the NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, was welcomed in Canberra in the first part of 2005. As consideration of a PRT deployment continued through the latter half of 2005, Afghan's President, Hamid Karzai, weighed in during a media conference with Prime Minister Howard, on a visit to Kabul, to encourage the idea.

As the PRT proposal firmed up in the course of these deliberations, the international politics became intense while we sorted out with NATO and individual members just who it was we would partner with. In the end, the Dutch won the prize, an outcome encouraged by NATO and especially, as I recall, by the United Kingdom.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ An interest incidentally that I did not fully share at that time, and still do not.

Thus, on 21 February 2006, the Prime Minister announced the deployment of an ADF Reconstruction Task Force incorporated in a Netherlands-led PRT in Uruzgan Province as part of ISAF's Stage III expansion. A visit to Canberra by the Dutch Prime Minister followed in March 2006. From this beginning our contribution grew incrementally over the following seven or so years to encompass various reconstruction, mentoring and force protection roles, then a PRT leadership role, and eventually leadership of the Combined Team – Uruzgan as well as ‘embeds’ and others in Kabul and Kandahar.

2005–08

From a national policy point of view, what is especially interesting is how a limited and cautious decision in 2005 for the ADF to ‘help others help Afghanistan’ followed by another to deploy an ‘ADF Reconstruction Team’ evolved into a genuine whole-of-government effort, and why. This evolution took place in two stages. The first was from 2005 to 2008. By committing in early 2006 to join a PRT, and to partner with the Dutch in Uruzgan, we implicitly accepted the case for a broader civil–military approach. We wanted to do, and be seen to be doing, more or less what the others were doing, and once there, of course, we wanted to do it well.

This meant engaging agencies beyond the ADF. Institutionally, AusAID, DFAT and the AFP were not reluctant to take on roles, and indeed they had plenty of volunteers once their roles were established. But the government was always cautious, and very conscious of the costs and the risks. While the ADF was funded by the usual ‘no-win, no-loss’ financing provisions, funding to support non-Defence deployments remained parsimonious (‘out of hide’) through to about 2008.

Nevertheless, the aid program that had delivered some \$94 million to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2005 was stepped up. In the period 2005–08, some \$236 million was disbursed through AusAID, most of it through multilateral agencies and the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund in largely hands-off ways. However, some aid went directly into Uruzgan, and the ADF delivered aid worth about \$117 million on the ground in the province, in large part with the aim of ensuring community support for our military presence. As the focus moved more to direct aid, the first AusAID civilian was posted to Uruzgan in 2008. In the same period,

to 2008, the ADF presence grew first to about 900, then to 1,100 through numerous evolutions of role and title: Reconstruction Task Force, then Mentoring Reconstruction Task Force and so on.

The AFP mission also grew, and from 2007 shifted to Regional Command South in Kandahar, where it played a useful role in counter-narcotics support for the Afghan National Police. Whereas before 2005 Australia's ambassador to Afghanistan had been accredited to Kabul from Islamabad, in 2006 the government opened a small embassy in Kabul, first in the Serena Hotel until it was attacked, then located temporarily in ADF House. It subsequently relocated to a donga in the US Embassy compound, where it clung on until 2009 in circumstances that have to be described frankly as demeaning.

2009–13

Thus government concerns were eased, the idea of a PRT was acculturated at ministerial level, and the mission grew, leading to the second stage and to what became a whole-of-government endeavour, which lasted until 2013.

The biggest steps in this journey were announced by Prime Minister Rudd on 29 April 2009 in a major statement on Afghanistan in which he linked military and civil endeavours more explicitly than hitherto.¹⁰ The ADF role was further enhanced, and a significant increase in Australia's aid commitment announced, with much more to be spent on the ground. This was together with an increased mentoring role for the AFP in Tarin Kowt, although at cost to the work they had been doing in regard to counter-narcotics work in Kandahar.

DFAT staff were to be posted to Tarin Kowt, more AusAID staff added and the embassy upgraded and relocated into its own premises. With increased force protection requirements, the ADF presence reached—and was capped at, officially at least—1,550, making the Australian force the 10th largest in a coalition, which was growing towards 50 members.

10 Prime Minister the Hon. K. Rudd MP, press conference, Parliament House, Canberra, 29 April 2009.

Rudd also announced the appointment of a ‘Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan’, and that is where I came in. I was living in Washington, doing my own thing at the Woodrow Wilson Center, when the Prime Minister asked me to take on this ‘special envoy’ task. For the first two months I worked from there, visiting the State Department frequently, the Pentagon and other agencies as I could, and working especially with Richard Holbrooke, the US Special Representative.

Holbrooke’s appointment was significant. He had expected to be Secretary of State in a Hillary Clinton administration. His new position was created, I believe, because the Obama administration accepted that the war could not be concluded by military means alone, and that the State Department and its counterparts in coalition countries should be written into the script to help develop a different approach. This would be immensely time-consuming, and the Secretary herself would not be able to devote that time to the issue, so Holbrooke’s very senior position was created.

Australia, by now one of the larger contributors to the coalition, was asked explicitly to nominate a person to work with Holbrooke and an initially small group of ‘special representatives’ or envoys. Their role at the outset was one of statecraft, although over time—and especially after the United States began its drawdown—it evolved more in the direction of stagecraft.

Holbrooke’s formative years, incidentally, had been as a civilian adviser in Vietnam. He believed strongly in the need for a civilian role in delivering aid, fostering governance and working the political leadership, although he was realistic about the challenges in this area. He also thought there was an important role for regional countries, not least in trying to influence Pakistan and in reaching out to the Taliban. He believed personally that a political settlement would be necessary sooner or later, and, although I suspect Obama as well as Clinton agreed with this, the Pentagon effectively vetoed it as a policy. It was not until after Holbrooke died—tragically, from an aneurism suffered in Hillary’s office in December 2010—that she first spoke of a ‘negotiation’, by which she meant a negotiation to separate the Taliban from al-Qaeda. By then it was 2011, and the United States had reversed its 2009 surge. The United States was clearly preparing its way out, so the Taliban had no reason to talk seriously.

As to Australia’s mission, it quickly became evident to me as Special Envoy that while we had an all-of-government’ presence, it was not functioning optimally on the ground, and was not coming together quite as well as it

should in Canberra. There were the usual hardworking inter-agency task forces, but by then our commitment in people, treasure and policy capital demanded more than that.

So when I returned to Canberra in August, I helped put together an inter-agency group that operated at the CDF/Secretary/agency-head level, chaired by the National Security Adviser in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, which met at least fortnightly. In time, that led to what I think was a pretty optimal all-of-government functioning in Canberra, better advice to the National Security Committee and a better connected performance on the ground in Afghanistan.

By the time the government decided to withdraw from Tarin Kowt in 2013, ADF, DFAT, AusAID and AFP leaders on the ground were agreed that, after some pain along the way, the whole-of-government effort there was as good as we had ever had, including joint civilian–ADF leadership in Tarin Kowt and close working relationships in Kabul.

In the meantime, the government had taken three significant policy decisions about our presence. The first was to take over leadership of the PRT from the Dutch when they left in 2010, but to decline leadership of the Combined Team – Uruzgan, leaving that to the United States. The second was to reverse that decision in 2012 and agree to take over from the United States.

Why the reversal? It was never made explicit to us as officials, but my hunch, not entirely uninformed, is that the government feared that if we had taken over in 2010, the United States would have withdrawn its enablers from Uruzgan, leaving us to hold a much larger baby than we wanted or could afford. But by 2012 that concern had been mitigated, and it was clear we were on the way out anyway.

And the third great decision in this period was of course the ultimate one: to withdraw from Uruzgan at the end of 2013 after progressively handing over to the Afghan security forces throughout 2012 and 2013. Incidentally, once the decision was made to be out by the end of 2013, there was some surprise in government about the pace at which the ADF moved—the military planners in effect set policy over the closing months.

Why were we leaving? Because the cost had been great, and the coalition partners, especially the United States, were tiring and leaving. We—that is, the coalition—had in the meantime given ourselves an ‘out’.

With the Afghan security forces much improved through the training and mentoring of coalition partners, and now larger and more generously resourced than ever before, Afghanistan's future could surely be placed in their hands.

All of the change that our presence in Afghanistan underwent in the period 2005 to 2013, and especially after 2008, has led to debate about whether Australia's national strategic objectives changed in Afghanistan during the decade we were there. Having thought a lot about this, my answer is that they did not, and that what changed was the means by which the government, and the 50-member international coalition, sought to achieve those objectives. The two key themes had been reiterated consistently by government leaders from 2001 to 2013.

At the outset, Prime Minister Howard and his ministers had emphasised that the mission was aimed at ensuring that Afghanistan could not remain or become again a safe haven for international terrorists, and was undertaken in support of our alliance interests. These aims were restated when our enhanced deployment in 2005 was announced, although with additional (but passing) emphasis on the importance of safeguarding the elections about to be held in Afghanistan because, 'if democracy takes root [in Afghanistan] ... then a massive blow is struck in the war against terrorism'.¹¹

In his major speech of April 2009, Prime Minister Rudd made the same points in his own language. He spoke about 'the need to deny sanctuary to terrorists who have threatened and killed Australian citizens', and about 'our enduring commitment to the United States and the ANZUS Treaty'. He contended that what we were seeking was the 'stabilisation of the Afghan state through a combination of military, police and civilian effort to the extent necessary to consolidate [the] primary mission of strategic denial'.¹²

In 2010, Prime Minister Gillard said explicitly that 'Our mission in Afghanistan is not nation-building', and in 2011 reaffirmed the government's objectives: 'there must be no safe haven for terrorists in

11 Prime Minister the Hon. J. Howard MP, 'Address to the Australian troops', Campbell Barracks, Perth, 24 August 2005.

12 Rudd, press conference, 29 April 2009.

Afghanistan. We must stand firmly by our ally, the United States.¹³ And in his speech in Tarin Kowt marking the closure of our base there in October 2013, Prime Minister Abbott again reflected the two key objectives of our mission when he said: 'The threat of global terrorism is reduced. Our reliability as an ally is confirmed.'¹⁴ In short, while the rhetoric wandered about at times, and the nature of what we did on the ground went through many changes, the strategic policy objectives remained the two we had started with.

Let me conclude with three points. The first reflects the 'lessons learned' work I did with the Australian Civil-Military Centre, at Defence's request, about government decision-making and whole-of-government processes in relation to Afghanistan.¹⁵ There were many lessons: about aid programs, communications, resourcing of agencies, working with allies, detainee management (a matter of particular sensitivity, incidentally)—all the things you would expect.

But one that I think matters particularly is this: we must accept that when we commit the ADF to operations abroad, significant whole-of-government and foreign policy implications are bound to be generated. Rather than trying to retrofit additional machinery to an ADF operation, DFAT and other agencies as necessary should be fully properly engaged from the outset on the ground as well as in Canberra, and resourced through Defence-like 'no-win, no-loss' provisions.

Second, I referred earlier to my sense that there was always a degree of caution about Afghanistan at the highest levels in Australia. Governments of both kinds were highly sensitive to the risks implicit in the Afghan project, risks that were of three types: to personnel, later to the budget, and to policy interests—what could be achieved, and how distracting would it be? This is reflected not only in the statements made by prime ministers and ministers, but also in some of the lively exchanges I can recall with and among ministers about what Australia was doing and could achieve in Afghanistan.

13 Prime Minister the Hon. J. Gillard MP, Speech to the House of Representatives, Ministerial Statements, Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 19 October 2010, pp. 692–4.

14 Prime Minister the Hon. T. Abbott MP, Address at Recognition Ceremony, Tarin Kowt, Afghanistan, 28 October 2013.

15 A public version of the report on this study has been released: Australian Civil-Military Centre, *Afghanistan: Lessons from Australia's Whole of Government Mission*, ACMC, Queanbeyan, 2016.

Finally, a word about a subject that comes up so often in discussion about conflicts of this kind: exit strategies. We have seen how the approaches of successive governments to the implementation of their policy objectives evolved in Afghanistan and Iraq during our missions there. At the outset in both cases, government asserted its determination not to be there for the long haul and not to become involved in occupation or reconstruction roles. But in time, in both cases, the elected government of the day decided, for what it considered good and sufficient policy reasons related as much to the company we were in as to circumstances on the ground, to do those things, and more. Government would have so decided even if it had had the most rigidly defined exit strategy or end state from day one.

Circumstances changed, and national policy implementation changed with it, even if the strategic objectives did not. As ever, when we become involved in conflicts in which the national interest is defined more in terms of policy benefits than national survival, and in which we are a member of a wider coalition, we will—as the Chinese would say—be ‘crossing the river by feeling the stones’.

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