

**WORKING PAPER NO. 62**

**CONSULTING THE PUBLIC  
ON DEFENCE**



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## Consulting the Public on Defence

### Evaluating the Howard Government's Community Consultation Initiative

*Graeme Cheeseman and Hugh Smith*

On 27 June 2000 the Howard Government released a public information or 'green' paper on defence which set in train a process of public consultation in which the people's views were sought on a range of defence and defence-related issues. This paper examines questions such as why the government chose to go to the people, how and by whom the community consultation was conducted, who was consulted and listened to, and how what was heard was reported. The paper concludes that the public consultation process was more about politics than policy; that it is inappropriate for the government to claim that it has heard from the 'Australian people' or even 'the majority of the community' on the issues raised; and that the consultation process and its outcomes are not entirely risk-free for the government and the defence establishment.



## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

On 27 June 2000 the Howard Government released an information paper on defence entitled *Defence Review 2000—Our Future Defence Force*. The paper initiated a process of public consultation whereby three former politicians and a retired military officer toured the country seeking people's views on:

- What they wanted Australia's armed forces to be able to do;
- Where they wanted the armed forces to be able to operate;
- The best way to structure Australia's defence forces, and
- The best way to spend the existing (or an expanded) defence budget.<sup>2</sup>

Between 18 July and 28 August more than 2000 people attended meetings in twenty-eight cities and regional centres around the country. Between one and four members of a Community Consultation Team (CCT), together with a small secretariat, listened to several hundred citizens presenting their views on Australia's defence. The report of the CCT was delivered to the government on 4 October and was released to the public on 9 November.<sup>3</sup> It is to be taken into account in the preparation of the forthcoming white paper on defence which is expected to be released towards the end of December 2000.<sup>4</sup>

A major purpose of this study, made possible by a small research grant from the University College ADFA, was to provide an independent report on, and appraisal of, the public consultation process and its results. How was the process both conducted and perceived? Whose views were canvassed and on what topics? What was said to the CCT and how representative were these views? What did the CCT itself say about the process and its results?

A second objective was to examine the politics behind the consultation process and its implications for defence and public policy making generally. While not entirely new—parliamentary committees have regularly canvassed public views on a range of defence and security issues—the decision of the Howard Government to seek public attitudes towards a range of defence issues prior to releasing a white paper on the subject was certainly a departure from past practice.<sup>5</sup> Until now defence decision making in Australia had never involved any real public participation. Governments of all political persuasions,

moreover, had seemed quite happy with this state of affairs.<sup>6</sup> Why the change of heart now and with what results? Did we witness a real exercise in democratic participation or a choreographed public 'consultation' aimed at achieving predetermined goals?

A third and related concern of this study was to look at some of the possible consequences of the exercise both for Australia's evolving defence posture and for the political and other contexts in which the policy making process is embedded. The discussion paper on defence, around which the consultation process was constructed, sought guidance on a range of important questions and concerns.<sup>7</sup> These questions, and their associated policy choices, pointed to some of the contending approaches to peace and security in a post-Cold War and increasingly globalised world.<sup>8</sup> The answers are likely to have a major impact on the future shape of Australia's defence and security policies. What guidance, then, was received from the public on these questions and what, if any, impact will this have on Australia's defence policies and approaches? Will it help resolve some of the dilemmas currently confronting our defence planners, encourage (or discourage) further change and reform, and set a precedent for defence planning in the future?

It is instructive to note that the decision to go to the public also occurred at an interesting time in the evolution of Australian defence. The past few years have been a relatively difficult and turbulent time for our defence decision makers. The Defence Department has had to review its existing strategic assumptions and policies to take account of the Asian economic crisis and the subsequent events in East Timor. It has been under increasing political pressure to become both more efficient and effective. And it has had to deal with a series of internal incidents and activities which have attracted unusual, and increasingly critical, media attention. These include a protracted public brawl between the Minister for Defence and his politically appointed civilian head; continuing revelations of sexual harassment and other misdemeanours within the armed forces; continuing mismanagement of departmental resources; and the spectacle of the current Secretary of Defence publicly lambasting his department and some of its senior officials.

The government thus sought to involve the community at a time of growing media interest in, and disquiet about, the activities of the Defence Department and Australia's armed forces. How might this have affected

the consultation process and the politics surrounding it? In light of the events just described, what might be the implications of not taking the public's view into account? And what broader lessons or conclusions can and should be drawn from the exercise?

The paper looks, first, at why the government chose to go to the public in the first place. This is followed by an examination of the consultation process itself and its reported outcomes. It concludes by looking at some of the potential lessons of the process for the government, defence planners and the public.

### A NEW APPROACH TO DEFENCE POLICY MAKING?

The release of the public discussion paper on defence and the subsequent consultative process were trumpeted by the Howard Government as a 'new', even 'unprecedented', approach to defence policy making. The stated reason for this new stance was that, in view of major changes taking place around us, the debate over Australia's defence needed to be extended beyond the small number of academics and other specialists who were normally involved in the process to include 'all Australians'. By going beyond the 'experts', the government hoped to 'encourage a vigorous, challenging and constructive discussion' of the issues involved. It would also, according to the government, help the people of Australia obtain a 'better understanding' of the issues that had to be considered in preparing defence policy generally and the forthcoming white paper in particular.<sup>9</sup>

The decision to seek public input was supported by most editorialists and specialist commentators, even though many felt it would make little difference to what would be included in the forthcoming defence white paper. The *Age* newspaper, for example, 'doubted how much the defence white paper... will actually reflect contributions from the wider community rather than from professional strategists'. It added, however, that:

the government's decision to seek inspiration beyond the narrow and sometimes self-absorbed world of the Defence Force, the Defence Department and institutes of strategic studies is a recognition that the assumptions that have hitherto guided Australian defence policy are no longer tenable. Australians are being asked to tell their government not only how much they think it should spend on their defence but what they want the Defence Force to do.<sup>10</sup>

An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* similarly noted that 'it is easy to question the effectiveness of the unprecedented canvassing of public opinion' prior to the release of the government's new defence white paper. It concluded, 'despite these reservations, the Green Paper is a good idea because it will help focus attention on Australia's unique strategic tension between its history and its geography'. While there will inevitably be a compromise between what is needed and what is provided, the paper continued,

the public should still be educated about the difficult spending choices needed to deal with the changing and possibly deteriorating circumstances in the region. An identifiable public consensus on these issues would in itself be a contribution to defence preparedness.

Some media commentators doubted whether the consultations would produce anything particularly interesting or new, while others worried that the defence agenda would be captured by 'talkback bullies'. Many questioned the government's stated rationale for going to the public; arguing, in some cases, that the process was a means of testing public opinion or of building public support for increasing the defence vote, rather than being a genuine exercise in public consultation. Others felt the decision was motivated by a desire to win over those in Cabinet sceptical of the need for expenditure on big-ticket defence equipment, and to convince them that there would be little public backlash if the government increased defence expenditure at the expense of other programs.<sup>12</sup>

Another possible reason for extending the debate beyond the various 'experts' in Canberra and elsewhere, was that their views were increasingly at odds with those of the government and its key advisers—witness the critical responses to the so-called 'Howard doctrine' and the US proposal for Australia to assist development of a theatre missile defence system. A further factor may have been the need to offset the growing negative publicity surrounding the Department of Defence and the armed services. In this climate enhanced public understanding and support—should it be forthcoming—would be an essential prerequisite to any proposal to increase Australia's defence budget, and/or to alter the country's existing defence policies or structures.<sup>13</sup> Both these possibilities had been flagged in the lead-up to the release of the discussion paper: the first in the Prime Minister's news conference following the launch of the discussion paper,<sup>14</sup> and the second in the release of the so-called 'Howard doctrine' which held out the possibility of

Australian forces being prepared to fight alongside their allies in a conventional war in northeast Asia.<sup>15</sup>

Thus while most informed commentators welcomed the government's decision to seek the public's views on defence, they were also suspicious of its rationale for doing so. These initial suspicions were shared by many in the community whose sense of unease about the process was no doubt enhanced by the government's insistence from the outset that it was under no obligation to accept the findings of the CCT—it simply undertook to 'consider' the team's report. While the 'people' were being given an opportunity to have 'their say' on what Australia's defence policies should be, the process of determining actual policy would continue to be closed to outside participation.

The consultation process was also seen to serve rather different and conflicting purposes: to educate the public about some of the difficult choices currently facing Australia's defence planners; to involve or implicate them in any decisions that are made, particularly those requiring an increase in defence spending; to canvass new or alternative approaches to securing Australia and its interests in an increasingly complex and uncertain world; and to generate a vigorous and constructive discussion of the kinds of issues laid out in the government's discussion paper. To what extent were these various suspicions justified, and the hopes and objectives of the process satisfied?

### THE CONSULTATION PROCESS, ACTORS AND OUTCOMES

The defence public consultation process occurred on several levels. The Community Consultation Team (CCT) comprising three former politicians—Andrew Peacock, David MacGibbon (both Liberals) and Stephen Loosley (ALP)—and the current Chair of the Defence Committee of the RSL, Major General Adrian Clunies-Ross, held public meetings in every capital city in Australia and a number of regional centres (see Table 1). In addition, the CCT had face-to-face discussions with a number of key industry and other interest groups (see Table 2). Written submissions were also invited and by the end of the process some 1160 had been received from members of the public and interest groups. Public interest was also evident in the distribution of more than 17,000 copies of the Discussion Paper and over 100,000 visits to the Team's website.

At the same time, a consultation process took place within the Australian Defence Force. Service chiefs and group managers canvassed views from within their organisations, while an 'independent' review team comprising Professor Paul Dibb from the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, and Air Vice Marshal (Ret) Brendan O'Loughlin, current head of the Australian Defence College, visited a number of defence bases to listen to the views of service personnel. While the CCT's report was given directly to the government, these latter views went to the Chief of Defence Force and the Secretary of Defence.

The following analysis deals with the community consultation process only. In the remainder of this section we look, in turn, at: 1) the composition of the CCT and how it conducted itself; 2) who attended and spoke at the public meetings; 3) what was said by those who spoke and how this was received and reported by the CCT; and 4) how representative were the views being presented. Key concerns here are, first, whether the composition and approach of the CCT served to dilute or enhance some of the suspicions about the consultation process entertained in the media and elsewhere. Second, were the views raised before the CCT and subsequently reported by them to the government a reasonable reflection of those of Australians in general?

### The Community Consultation Team

The credibility of any exercise in public consultation rests, in the first instance, on the fact that those conducting the inquiry are not seen as partisan players and that they approach their task objectively and in an unbiased manner. In the minds of some commentators at least, the composition of the CCT did not meet the first of these requirements. Two of the four members of the CCT, Peacock and MacGibbon, were long-standing Liberal Party politicians. Peacock was an ex-Minister and party leader who took on the job because he was asked by his friend and former colleague, John Moore.<sup>16</sup> MacGibbon had served as chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade which had recommended increased defence spending in 1998.<sup>17</sup>

Nor were Loosley and Clunies-Ross necessarily disinterested actors: both were on record as supporting

or advocating positions which accorded with those of the government. In a newspaper article published just prior to the release of the defence discussion paper, Loosley argued that ‘the single most important element in a sound defence strategy is the building of a broad, national consensus within the Australian community’, including within parliament (a sentiment subsequently echoed by both Moore and Howard).<sup>18</sup> While declaring that Australia would ‘require a continuing measure of self-reliance in the defence of the Australian continent and in operating in our immediate region’, he also argued that ‘co-operation with our allies, particularly the Americans, needs serious commitment and

planning’. Echoing the government’s discussion paper on defence, Loosley went on to say that the ‘chief problem’ facing Australia’s defence planners was the issue of block obsolescence:

The total cost of weapons and support replacement through to 2020 is estimated at \$80 billion to \$110 billion. Although the technological leaps of the revolution in military affairs may offer some lower-cost innovations, the demands on the taxpayer will be enormous. So broad public endorsement is vital in making certain that governments of both persuasions can sustain defence strategy into the future.

**Table 1**  
**Community Consultation Public Meeting Program**

Venue	Date	Venue	Date
Adelaide	18 July	Armidale	9 August
Whyalla	19 July	Newcastle*	10 August
Alice Springs	19 July	Nowra	11 August
Perth	25 July	Canberra*	15 August
Darwin	26 July	Albury/Wodonga*	16 August
Port Hedland	26 July	Wagga Wagga*	17 August
Geraldton	26 July	Bathurst	17 August
Toowoomba	31 July	Melbourne*	22 August
Brisbane	1 August	Bendigo*	23 August
Townsville*	2 August	Geelong	23 August
Rockhampton	2 August	Hobart*	23 August
Cairns*	3 August	Launceston*	24 August
Sydney*	8 August	Ballarat*	24 August
Dubbo	9 August	Bunbury	28 August

*Note:* meetings marked with an (\*) were attended by one or both of the researchers.

Clunies-Ross, too, had publicly advocated positions on some of the issues advanced for debate in the government's discussion paper. Appearing before the Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs and Defence in February 2000 in his capacity as Chair of the RSL's National Defence Committee, for example, he criticised the current focus on the defence of Australia and argued that our defence force 'must [now] be capable of external deployments as well the ability to defend the mainland'. He added that the ADF's

prime requirement is to structure and train for war. If this is done, peacetime requirements and peacekeeping requirements will inevitably be adequately covered. *The reverse is not the case.* An emphasis on peacekeeping, for instance, as the prime requirement would mean that essential skills and capabilities would be lost.<sup>20</sup>

Any suggestion of bias was vigorously rejected by the CCT itself. In an interview with *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Alan Ramsey, the Chair of the CCT, Andrew Peacock, insisted that he and his team were not part of some public relations or public education campaign. He went on to say that he genuinely believed the government wanted to know what the community thought of the issues being raised, that he had not been instructed by either the government or Defence on what to say or do, and that he and his team would closely oversee the preparation of the final report.

I'm not writing it, but we're going to be directing how it's written...we've already changed the outline. Clunies-Ross, MacGibbon and I have told them, that's the defence guys, that we're going to be directing each and every paragraph. Really. It will be OUR report, whatever they do with it'.<sup>21</sup>

Peacock concluded that the final protection against delivering only what Moore and his government wanted was the presence of Loosley and Clunies-Ross who would, he assured Ramsey, 'go off their faces if I was putting a ministerial line'.<sup>22</sup>

These protestations notwithstanding, the composition of the CCT did little to dispel initial concerns over the government's motives for seeking community involvement. This initial level of scepticism would have been reinforced by the fact that the CCT was given less than three months to talk to the community and distil its views, and that its public hearings were conducted at the same time as submissions were being received, thereby lessening the chance of any real dialogue among those contributing to the process.

Submissions made to the CCT were initially not to be made public. However, following representations by a number of community groups and others, the government changed its mind and will release the submissions, although only after finalisation of the CCT's report.

Still more scepticism stemmed from the fact that the CCT spent perhaps as much time meeting with and talking to selected interest groups as it did with the public in general.<sup>23</sup> As can be seen from Table 2, the groups that were afforded this extra (and, it might be thought, privileged) access were dominated by ex-service organisations and those representing the interests of Australian business and local government. One meeting was held at the University of Queensland, but the Team did not make a point of going to a wide range of university campuses. Nor were any NGOs or community organisations such as the United Nations Association of Australia, the Australian Council for Overseas Aid or the Australian Conservation Foundation directly consulted by the team or invited to make a submission outside the broader public consultation process. Comments made by members of the Team and subsequent press reports made it clear, moreover, that the 'private' meetings with the business community in particular had an impact on both the CCT's agenda and its subsequent representations to government.<sup>24</sup> Finally the report of the CCT was drafted by officials from the Defence Department rather than by the team itself or, as in the case of parliamentary committees, by independent staff.

### The public meetings

Potential misgivings about the process could have been accentuated by the way in which the meetings between the CCT and the public were arranged and conducted. The tight schedule imposed by the government resulted in a number of meetings being held concurrently in different parts of the country. This meant that while all available members of the CCT attended all of the capital city meetings, the regional meetings were usually presided over by only one or two of the Team. Apart from fitting in with the government's timetable for releasing the defence white paper, the scheduling of concurrent meetings may have lessened the capacity of the CCT members to obtain an overall view of what the public was saying, and, consequently, increased their dependence on their accompanying officials (who recorded the proceedings).

Any capacity for public debate over, or an exchange of views on, the questions raised by the discussion paper was further restricted by the tendency to limit the meeting times to around two hours. While some meetings were extended beyond this time, this was usually to accommodate more speakers rather than facilitate debate. Indeed the chairs of the CCT sought specifically to avoid discussion and dialogue with the public by declaring at the beginning of each meeting that the Team was not there to discuss issues but to

listen to the community and take its opinions back to Canberra. Even so, in several of the regional meetings the chairs went beyond this proscribed role and reported at the beginning on the results of earlier meetings (including, in some cases, the ‘emerging consensus’ of views) and summed up at the end the sense of the existing meeting. Significantly this approach was not followed in capital city meetings where the opinions of the presenters were usually divided.

**Table 2**  
**Interest groups and other organisations consulted by the CCT**

Returned Services League of Australia	Defence Industry Assoc Forum	Queensland Liberal Party
Royal United Services Institute	Business Council of Australia	Premier of South Australia
Coastwatch	Australian Industries Group	Chief Minister of the Northern Territory
Australian Reserve Association	The Crawford Fund	Chief Minister of the ACT
Armed Forces Federation of Australia	Australian Business Limited	Premier of Tasmania
Australian Defence Association	Newcastle Hunter Business Corporation	Various Local Government Officials (1)
	Institution of Engineers	
	Australian Chamber of Commerce	
	Shipbuilders Association	

*Note (1):* These included the Mayor and/or city councils of Ballarat, Bathurst, Dubbo, Bendigo, Port Stephens, Singleton and Wagga Wagga.

*Source:* *Australian Perspectives on Defence*, Appendix B.

Who attended? As shown in Table 3, the numbers at the meetings at which we were present varied considerably from just eleven people in Ballarat to over 180 in Melbourne (as an aside, the number cited by CCT members to either the press or to subsequent meetings were often greater than our count). The composition of the audiences was predominantly male and middle aged or older, a feature noted by some speakers and commentators as well as the authors.<sup>25</sup> This was most evident in regional centres, where very few women or young people were present. There were almost no people of obvious Aboriginal or non-Anglo/European backgrounds at the meetings covered by this analysis.

Some of the capital city meetings witnessed organised protests and a police presence. Members of the Democratic Socialist Party and other student groups, for example, demonstrated quietly outside the meetings in Hobart and Melbourne, with placards such as ‘Money for Jobs not War’ and, in a reference to the then current debate on military aid to civilian authorities, ‘No Troops Against Civilians’. Protesters were ejected from the meeting in Brisbane and made their views known in at least two other meetings (Sydney and Melbourne). While most speakers welcomed the consultation process as an opportunity for the expression of views, some expressed cynicism about the process, commenting that they did not expect their views to make any difference—though they went on to make their remarks anyway. One speaker in Launceston wondered why the public were being asked for their views when Defence had a large numbers of experts in Canberra with far more expertise and information than the ordinary person could ever hope for. Some others felt that the formal nature of the meetings, where people were asked to address the audience from a central stage or lectern, was ‘unfriendly’ and even ‘intimidating’.

Nearly ninety per cent of those we saw addressing the CCT were male. Just under half of the speakers made known their association with the armed forces or the defence establishment e.g. serving ADF members, ex-members, reservists, representatives of defence industry. The other significant groupings that could be identified were local politicians and officials and, in capital cities only, members of peace and other community groups (representing just under ten per cent

of the speakers in each case). It is interesting, and instructive, to note that the CCT’s final report provided no details of those who participated in the public meetings. A ‘demographic’ breakdown of both the written submissions and the requests for information was provided in Appendix C but was neither described nor analysed in the body of the CCT’s report. Yet, as in the case of the public hearings, the figures showed that a significant proportion of the written submissions to the inquiry came from people associated with industry or the armed forces, and that both submissions and requests for information came overwhelmingly from the country’s male (and quite likely) older citizens. This reinforces the view that the CCT only heard from, or listened to, certain voices and, as discussed below, casts doubt on its claim, contained in the foreword to the report, that its findings represented ‘what the Australian public [as a whole] has told us’.<sup>26</sup>

### The CCT’s principal findings

The CCT’s findings were flagged in various statements, both formal and informal, made by members of the team during its hearings, as well as in a number of press accounts of the report’s likely contents.<sup>27</sup> The findings contained in the Team’s final report thus came as no great surprise to most commentators. Arguing that there was strong community interest in the future of Australia’s defence, the CCT claimed majority support for the following basic positions and proposals:

- going to the people on the issue
- an increase in defence spending combined with continuing fiscal discipline
- a focus on the defence of Australia but include a capacity, alone or with coalition partners, to undertake ‘significant’ operations within the region
- a properly equipped, well-balanced ADF structured for warfighting rather than peacekeeping
- greater recognition of the needs of service personnel, the reserve force and the interests of regional Australia
- greater emphasis on Australia’s defence industry.<sup>28</sup>

**Table 3**  
**Numbers attending and speaking and the affiliations of speakers**  
**at CCT meetings attended by the authors**

Venue	Number		Speakers' background or affiliation				
	Attended	Spoke (Female)	Services/ Ex- Services	Defence Industry/ Business	Peace Movement /NGO	Local Politicians/ Officials	Other/ Unknown
Townsville	40+	19(2)	11	1		2	5
Cairns	66+	25(3)	16	3			6
Sydney	150+	21(3)	6	3	4	1	7
Newcastle	70+	23(4)	12	2	1	1	7
Canberra	150+	23(4)	9		5	2	7
Albury/ Wodonga	17	12(1)	9			2	1
Wagga	60+	19(2)	6			3	10
Melbourne	180+	19(6)	4	3	3		9
Bendigo	28	11(0)	7	1		2	1
Hobart	60+	21(0)	11	2	1	2	5
Ballarat	11	9(0)	7				2
Launceston	30+	12(1)	5	1			6
TOTAL	862+	214(26)	103	16	14	15	66

Were these prospective conclusions justified? Table 4 provides an overview of the principal issues and concerns raised by speakers at the various public meetings we attended. Some speakers focused on a single concern while others raised multiple issues. For ease of presentation, the issues have been grouped under several categories:

- 1) strategic and conceptual issues: broad conceptual issues such as Australia's changing security environment, the nature and meaning of security and its implications for the role of military force(s), and what should be Australia's overall strategic and defence posture (in this last instance answering the government's questions on what Australia's armed forces should do, and where they should be able to operate);
- 2) defence capability and equipment: support for or criticism of particular military capabilities and equipments;
- 3) defence policy and doctrine such as conditions of service or military training and education;
- 4) defence industry: policies and practices relating to defence industry and equipment acquisition (including private enterprise supplying the ADF);
- 5) Australia's alliance relationship with the United States;
- 6) reserves and cadet forces;
- 7) defence expenditure: whether or not Australia needs to spend more on defence and how much;
- 8) threats: specific threats or sources of insecurity—such as illegal immigration or the 'Indonesian threat'—rather than overall assessments of Australia's strategic circumstances; and
- 9) other issues: see notes to Table 4.

While this mode of presentation is far from precise, it does provide an indication of the kind and range of concerns raised during the consultations (at least along the east coast of Australia). The overall totals at the bottom of Table 4 show, for example, that most people were more concerned with specific or day-to-day practices and policies than with broad conceptual

questions about Australia's overall defence and security posture. This is not surprising given the speakers' backgrounds. Indeed, there seemed to be a fairly clear correlation between speaker affiliations and the issues raised. Serving and former members expressed concern mainly over personnel and management issues and the rundown of service numbers and equipment. Industry and business representatives often wanted more spending—in Australia generally and the local economy in particular. Members of the various peace and similar community groups sought uniformly to place defence within broader security contexts or frameworks.

There was strong support for the maintenance of some kind of defence force in Australia. No-one, not even those who espoused pacifist tendencies, argued that we should have no military forces at the present time. However, only a minority of speakers looked at the question of what Australia's military forces should do from a broad strategic or conceptual viewpoint. Some stated that these kinds of questions were best left to those with expertise in the matter while others either did not directly address the issue or, at best, inferred that Australia should continue doing what it did now but be more adequately resourced and/or prepared for these roles.

Speakers who did try to look at the question in broader conceptual terms were divided between those, mostly with military affiliations, who favoured maintaining a traditional approach to defence and security (roughly in line with options one and two in the discussion paper in which forces would be structured and maintained respectively for defeating military attacks on Australia, and broader regional security roles). The second position, largely expressed by peace and community groups, was that Australia's defence and security policies and structures had to be developed within a broader security framework (more emphasis given to option three—structuring the ADF for military operations other than war—although the other two options were not discounted). Very few speakers were opposed to the ADF being used in future peacekeeping and peace support operations. The primary difference was whether or not the ADF should be structured for such a role, with the majority, largely those with military affiliations, saying no. The justification for this position, to the extent it was argued at all, was that forces structured for war could relatively easily be used in peace operations whereas the latter was not the case (a view that had been advanced in the discussion paper).

**Table 4**  
**Key interests or issues raised by persons addressing the CCT**

Venue (no of speakers)	Speakers' primary concerns or interests (1)							
	Security strategy concept	Defence		Defence Industry	US alliance	Reserves	Defence expendit ure	Threats
		Capabili ty/ equipme nt	Policy/ doctrine					
T'sville (19)	11	12	11	2	2	7	6	2
Cairns (25)	10	4	10	5	2	9	2	2
Sydney (21)	6	5	5	4	2	2	2	4
N'castle (23)	4	5	10	5	1	4	3	3
C'berra (23)	9	6	5		2	2	3	
Albury/ Wodonga (12)	2	4	5	1		2	3	
Wagga (19)	2	4	6	1	1	1	3	2
M'bourne (19)	1	4	3	1		4	2	
Bendigo (11)	1	1	2	2		2	5	
Hobart (21)	13	10	13	2		8	10	2
Ballarat (9)		2	3			3	2	
L'ceston (12)	3	6	6	1	3	7	4	
TOTAL	62	63	79	24	13	51	45	15

*Note:* (1) Most speakers raised more than one issue. Other topics and issues raised at the meetings included:

Canberra: Consultation process, OH&S, police, United Nations, MND, RUSI conference.  
 Sydney: Citizen defence/gun control, human rights.  
 Albury: Mayoral thanks.  
 Wagga: Immigration, national service/citizen defence, land acquisition/settlement.  
 Melbourne: Aid to civil power, maritime services, listen to youth.  
 Bendigo: National service, public education.  
 Ballarat: Public education, aid to civil power.  
 Townsville: Nuclear weapons, lack of standard rail gauge.  
 Cairns: Gun laws, need for pipeline to Weipa.  
 Newcastle: Support the merchant marine.  
 Hobart: National service, cyber-war.  
 Launceston: National service, gun laws.

There was little support among the speakers we heard for a more assertive or aggressive defence posture of the kind flagged in the classified version of ASP97 or the short-lived ‘Howard doctrine’. Indeed a number of people from both the above ‘camps’ spoke against preparing the ADF for high intensity, conventional warfighting operations remote from Australia. While many speakers expressed concern about Australia’s increasingly unstable and uncertain region, very few raised the prospect of direct military attacks against us. Only Indonesia, India and China were mentioned, and then rarely. Of greater direct concern were the threats arising from illegal migration, illegal fishing and drug running (the so-called non-traditional security agenda which was acknowledged but tended to be downgraded by the discussion paper).

Most of those who spoke about defence expenditure, either at length or as an aside, were in favour of some sort of increase in line with the proposal contained in the discussion paper. But many speakers were also critical of wasteful procurement and management practices in Defence, and the evident failure of the department to use its already considerable resources efficiently and cost-effectively. The *Collins* submarines received a predictable hammering. There seemed little confidence in the current state of Australia’s defence establishment and its leadership. Former members of the armed forces frequently expressed concern about falling morale and declining conditions of service. Parents of service personnel who had served in East Timor contrasted the attention given to the military leadership there with the lack of attention given to the ordinary soldier (although the hard work and loyalty of individual service personnel was universally praised). Some of those who served in the ADF or worked in Australia’s defence industries were critical of the commercial support program and what they saw as an obsessive desire on the part of the government to privatise the non-combat components of the ADF. At the same time, regional spokespersons usually supported the program because of its boost to local economies and businesses.

A similar division of opinion was noted in the case of the alliance. While a number of speakers stressed the benefits of maintaining and even enhancing Australia’s defence relationship with the United States, many people (and not just those from the peace movement) were concerned that Australia should not become too dependent on the US. In their view, and often for

different reasons, we need to retain some distance between us and our ‘great and powerful friend’, and to develop and maintain a defence force that could be used to protect our own rather than shared interests. It is interesting to note that while this tension had been acknowledged in the defence discussion paper, the remarks made during the public hearings made it clear that the sentiment was not shared by most members of the CCT.

### **How representative were the views being expressed?**

As we have seen, attendances at the public meetings were neither large (a visit of the Prime Minister to the city of Ballarat at the same time as the CCT drew a significantly larger audience) nor particularly representative of the Australian community. In regional centres in particular, both audience and the speakers were dominated by people from the older sections of society and by those affiliated in one way or another with the defence establishment. It was clear, too, that those groups, listed in Table 2, that were afforded special or additional access were generally the same as those that attended the public meetings.

While numerous people declared themselves to be ‘ordinary citizens’, our impression was that ‘average Australians’—from such groups as women, indigenous Australians, migrants and young people—simply did not attend. The government may argue that these groups were given the same opportunity as the rest of the community to present their views to the CCT. This is true, although the formal nature of the proceedings and the predisposition of audiences, especially in some of the regional centres, may have served to intimidate those who felt that what they had to say was either unimportant or contrary to the prevailing view.

It could also be argued that if it was serious about giving ‘all Australians’ a say about ‘their defence policy’, the government should have structured the consultation process specifically to target those people and groups who did not have a specific or vested interest in defence, or who were likely to present radical or divergent views. This could have been done in a number of ways, such as polling public opinion on the questions raised in the discussion paper, conducting informal ‘outreach’ groups (of the kind used in meeting local government officials), or fostering public debates on the issues raised in the discussion paper.

Would this have made any difference? The trends observed by the CCT were generally in line with the results of public opinion polls taken during the Cold War period which indicate that a majority of Australians believed that: 1) we could be subject to a military attack at some time in the future (where the source of this threat tended to change in line with broader developments in Australia's external strategic circumstances); 2) we would have trouble effectively defending ourselves in the event of attack; and 3) we therefore need to spend more money on defence to bolster our capabilities.<sup>29</sup> While we might be able to rely on the United States to come to our aid, any doubt on this score only reinforced the need for strong defence.

More recent studies of public opinion, however, notably that of McAllister and Makkai, show some interesting and potentially important changes.<sup>30</sup> To begin with, the size of the majority view for most of the positions just described has been declining over time. Second, the overall results for some of these issues mask important generational differences. While those supporting greater defence spending increased between 1996 and 1998, the level of support was distinctly higher in the over-fifty age group. Significant generational differences also exist on the issues of the alliance and, not surprisingly, conscription. It remains to be seen, of course, whether the younger generation will become more conservative as it ages. Finally, when asked to rate the importance of a range of community concerns, the majority of respondents placed defence well down on their list of priorities, and below such other issues as health, taxation, unemployment, education and the environment. This suggests that many Australians would not be happy if the country's defence expenditure were to be increased at the expense of a range of other services.

Evidence for another important trend can be found in the recent report on the Australian Army by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. In a section entitled 'Community Views on Australia's Strategy', the report noted that while many submissions expressed concern over growing regional instability, these concerns did not translate into fears of an imminent attack on Australia itself. While 'in general, Australians would not accept a defence strategy which did not satisfy the requirements for a highly credible defence capability', there was also a 'noteworthy' number of respondents 'who defined

national security in terms broader than territorial defence'. Indeed, the crisis in East Timor made it clear that:

the community's expectations of the Defence Force are [now] greater than those perceived by the Department of Defence. ... Resolving gross abuses of human rights, peacekeeping and relieving humanitarian crises may not be seen by the population at large as an 'optional extra' for defence strategy.<sup>31</sup>

Thus while the overall views reported to the government by the CCT reflected the opinions of the majority of those they listened to, it is important that the CCT acknowledge the selected nature and special interests of their audiences. It is inappropriate to claim, for example, that the CCT heard the views of the 'Australian people' on the issues raised, or that the government received an overall mandate for its policies. Such a claim would require a significantly different consultation process.

#### **CONCLUSIONS: PUBLIC CONSULTATION OR CHOREOGRAPHY?**

What are we to make of the consultation process overall? To what extent were the various expectations of those who designed or commented on the process satisfied? What did it tell us about contemporary community beliefs and expectations? What messages should the government and the defence establishment draw from the exercise?

It seems to us that the stated objectives of the process were clearly not met in at least two important respects. First, while a sizeable proportion of speakers indicated that they had read the discussion paper, very few directly addressed the issues and questions that the document raised. There was a clear disconnect between the information supposedly sought by the government through the discussion paper and that provided by the public. Little attempt was made to put issues into some kind of broader context. Few speakers sought to take into account the kinds of trade-offs, raised in the defence discussion paper, that might need to be made between different capability, equipment or service options. Those speaking at the public meetings raised nothing that had not been raised by the 'defence experts' in Canberra and elsewhere. The public was more concerned with specific or day-to-day issues such

as the ADF's current training and educational practices, the structure and conditions of service of the reserves, and current or proposed weapons and equipment holdings.

Second, the process generated very little dialogue or debate within the community. The public discussion of defence generated by the consultation process, while certainly lively at some meetings, was neither sustained nor particularly constructive. The meetings themselves generated very little preceding or follow-on discussion in the media. What press coverage there was of the CCT meetings tended to be brief and superficial, focusing on CCT personalities as much as the issues under consideration.

While the exercise may not have met the formal expectations of the government, it did reveal broad support for a focus on defence of Australia and for a future 'moderate' increase in defence spending. Or, at least, no significant resistance was revealed. The consultation also provided a welcome vehicle for some 'ordinary Australians'—and especially those in 'the bush'—to have a say on what many see as an important area of government policy. While not intended to do so, it provided an opportunity for people to air certain grievances about Australia's armed forces and other aspects of life. It increased the profile of the ADF (and the government) in rural Australia. Finally it made some important connections between the Defence Department and regional Australia and the Liberal Party and its constituents.

Overall then, and as predicted by most commentators, the public consultation process was more about politics than policy. The clear winners from the process were the government and those in industry. The government earned widespread praise for breaking with tradition and involving the public in the defence decision-making process. It obtained a kind of mandate for increasing Australia's defence expenditure and maintaining a strong defence posture and was able to do this without any significant political opposition. Industry and business in Australia used the process to reinforce the mutual advantages of enhancing its role as the 'fourth arm' of Australia's defence. Leaders of the ADF also strongly welcomed the support for increased defence spending. Finally, Defence Minister Moore has added public weight to his agenda for reforming the defence bureaucracy in Canberra.

In terms of actual influence on policy, not too much can be expected. The consultation may stimulate measures to assist the reserves and perhaps the cadet movement, both of which are popular in local communities. But it is unlikely to deflect official policy from its current trajectory. Indeed, policy making continued apace during the consultation process. During the week in which the Discussion Paper was launched the Chief of Defence Force announced a cut in personnel numbers by 2000. Changes were also made to support for the reserves and a significant number of additional ASLAV armoured vehicles were ordered for the Army.

But the consultation process and its outcomes are not entirely risk-free for the government and those in the defence establishment who seek to benefit from its results. The terms in which the CCT has reported public opinion are so broad in scope that they will be consistent with any likely content of the white paper which the consultation process was purportedly designed to influence. The purpose of the ADF, for example, is said to be the defence of Australia but with a capacity for operations within the region, including peacekeeping. The alliance is supported but so is self-reliance within the alliance. The public may well ask: in what ways did the process actually change what is in the white paper? Those who have seriously put forward their views may wonder if they made any difference at all, and may conclude that the process was more an exercise in public relations than public involvement. Those whose more extreme views are ignored—the need for conscription or nuclear weapons, for example—might be reinforced in their criticism of government.

At the same time, those who believe the process to have been worthwhile and productive—because the government appears to have listened to their views—might expect to be more regularly and more effectively involved in the defence decision-making process in the future. Indeed, what is lacking from the report are any suggestions for sustaining public interest in defence or for greater public involvement in the supposedly narrow defence debate. A government that is genuinely anxious to involve the public will surely not be satisfied with a one-off operation.

While the exercise is likely to help deliver more money to defence, the amount will still be insufficient to resolve the planning and other dilemmas raised in the

discussion paper. Going to the public has not absolved the government and its advisers from having to make some very tough decisions. The difference now is that the public and media interest in the decision-making process has been raised, along with the political stakes involved. The irony here is that the messages coming from the consultation process may serve to dampen the reform process by encouraging the Minister for Defence and his advisers to continue to accept rather than challenge conventional wisdom in a range of areas, and to continue with, rather than seek to change, many existing and, in some cases at least, out-moded approaches to defence and security in a globalising world.

Opening up defence policy to public discussion and debate has also opened up the ADF itself to a range of community criticisms and concerns. The exercise has revealed that some sections of the community, are not

happy with the current leadership of the defence establishment and many of its practices. Some clearly resent money being spent on high-technology equipment at the expense of conditions of service for their sons and daughters in the ADF. Others are concerned by the continuing loss of morale within the armed forces, by the recent tensions between the Minister and some of his departmental advisers, or by the way the military and the defence department seem to be treating some service members. These underlying concerns are being reinforced at the present time by the continuing debate over aid to civilian authorities and by the parliamentary inquiry into brutality in one of the Army's elite units. The consultation process has perhaps served less to focus public attention on the strategic dilemmas of Australia's defence than to whet the public's appetite for closer examination of military administration and culture.

- <sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank the ADSC's referees and a number of other colleagues for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper.
- <sup>2</sup> Department of Defence, *Defence Review 2000 - Our Future Defence Force: A Public Discussion Paper* (Canberra: Defence Publishing Service DPS 38459/2000, June 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> *Australian Perspectives on Defence: Report of the Community Consultation Team September 2000* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). The key findings of the report are listed in The Hon. John Moore, 'Community Consultation Team Report released', Media Release MIN 325/00, 9 November 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> The Hon. John Moore, 'Defence Community Consultation Report', Media Release MIN 277/00, 4 October 2000.
- <sup>5</sup> Since 1994, Canada, Great Britain and New Zealand have all conducted similar exercises. Discussions of the Canadian and British exercises are contained in Albert Legault, *Canada and Peacekeeping: Three Major Debates* (Clementsport, NS: The Canadian Peacekeeping Press, Canadian International Peacekeeping Training Centre, 1999) and Ministry of Defence, *The Strategic Defence Review: Supporting Essays* (London: The Stationary Office, 1998), Supporting Essay One.
- <sup>6</sup> See Desmond Ball, 'Australian Defence Decision-Making: Actors and Process', *Politics*, XIV(2): 183-97, 1979; Graeme Cheeseman and Desmond Ball, 'Australian Defence Decision-Making', in Desmond Ball and Cathy Downes (eds), *Security and Defence: Pacific and Global Issues* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1990), pp. 250-67; and Graeme Cheeseman, 'Defence decision making: process and influences', in J. Mohan Malik (ed), *Australia's Security in the 21st Century* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999), pp. 128-46.
- <sup>7</sup> These included choices between alliance and self-reliance, preparing for independent or coalition operations, defending Australia or the region, quality versus quantity, conventional wars or non-combat military operations, and current versus future capabilities.
- <sup>8</sup> Some of these options are discussed in the *Australian Defence Force Journal*, No. 143, July/August 2000.
- <sup>9</sup> *Defence Review 2000*, p.1; 'Minister Announces Public Consultation Process on Defence', *Media Release*, The Hon. John Moore, MP. Minister for Defence, MIN 129/00, 13 June 2000. In a recent 'diligence report' on his Department, Secretary of Defence, Allan Hawke also stated that 'Defence can no longer take for granted that the community it serves understands why they need a Defence Organisation. And having to 'sell' ourselves in a modern society is not something we are used to doing'. Allan Hawke, 'What's the Matter—A Due Diligence Report', address to the National Press Club, 17 February 2000, <<http://www.defence.gov.au/media/2000/sec1.html>>, accessed 21 February 2000.
- <sup>10</sup> 'Time to Rethink Australia's Defence', *Age*, 29 June 2000, p. 18.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Green Paper Will Focus Our Attention', *Australian Financial Review*, 28 June 2000, p. 40.
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, Geoffrey Barker, 'Howard Dusts off Khakis', *Australian Financial Review*, 26 June 2000, p. 44; 'Former Defence Chief Questions Green Paper Process', *AAP*, 27 June 2000; Paul Kelly, 'Talks Won't Make Hard Decisions', *The Australian*, 28 June 2000, p. 13; Anthony Bergin, 'Consultation Benefits a Nation', *Australian*, 28 June 2000, p. 13; Hugh Smith, 'Defence's Travelling Show', *Australian Financial Review*, 28 June 2000; 'The Best Form of Defence', *Australian Financial Review*, 29 June 2000, p. 68; and 'Defence's \$500m Fightback', *Australian*, 10 October 2000.
- <sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Barker, 'A Defence Force in Turmoil', *Australian Financial Review*, 15 June 2000, p. 22; Alan Dupont, 'Look Forward to Variations', *Australian*, 28 June 2000, p. 13; Robert Garran, 'General Mayhem/Defence—The Coming Crisis', *Australian*, 6 May 2000, p. 27.
- <sup>14</sup> Ian McPhedran, 'PM Urges Defence Boost', *Herald Sun*, 28 June 2000, p. 14. The Prime Minister called for an increase in defence spending that was more than 'nominal' or 'derisory'. Lincoln Wright, 'Cruise Missiles May Displace F-111s in Key Defence Revamp', *Canberra Times*, 28 June 2000.
- <sup>15</sup> John Lyons, 'Operation Backflip', *The Bulletin*, 3 August 1999, pp. 20-25. As Lyons described, the basic precepts of the 'Howard doctrine' had been contained in the classified version of the government's 1997 strategic basis document ASP97. They were also flagged in an article by the head of the Department's Strategic Policy Branch, Hugh White, entitled 'The Strategic Review:

- What's New?', *JRUSI*, 19 (December 1998), 185-99.
- <sup>16</sup> Alan Ramsey, 'Peacock's Defence Strategy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 2000, p. 41.
- <sup>17</sup> Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Funding Australia's Defence* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, April 1998). It should also be noted that while serving with the Joint Committee, MacGibbon had also strongly criticised the Defence Department's management practices and many of its equipment procurement and other policy decisions.
- <sup>18</sup> 'Aust Defence Minister Calls for Bipartisan Defence Policy', *AAP*, 27 June 2000. Loosley's desire to reach a national consensus on defence is at odds with the defence discussion paper which stated, on page 1, that the exercise 'will not necessarily produce a consensus on key defence and security issues ... [and] *that is not the goal*' (emphasis added).
- <sup>19</sup> Stephen Loosley, 'Australia: Military Strategy Calls for Concord', *Australian*, 27 June 2000.
- <sup>20</sup> Major General Adrian Clunies-Ross, Evidence to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into the Suitability of the Australian Army for peacetime, peacekeeping and war, *Hansard*, 23 February 2000, p. FADT 215, emphasis added. He acknowledged that this was not to say 'that specific peacekeeping training is not a requirement'.
- <sup>21</sup> Alan Ramsey, 'Peacock's Defence Strategy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 2000, p. 41.
- <sup>22</sup> Ramsey, 'Peacock's Defence Strategy', p.41.
- <sup>23</sup> Some of these meetings were held in the same venue as, and just prior to, the community consultations. While 'open' to public attendance, they were not advertised (on the review team's website for example) and so were effectively 'private' hearings.
- <sup>24</sup> See for example, Peter La Franchi, 'Industry Wins Role in Defence White Paper', *Australian Financial Review*, 8 September 2000, p. 56 and the interview with Defence Secretary Allan Hawke in *Defense News*, 9 October 2000, p. 4.
- <sup>25</sup> See, for example, Simon Philpott, 'Outdated Views of Defence Needs', *Australian*, 28 August 2000, p. 12.
- <sup>26</sup> *Australian Perspectives on Defence*, p. v.
- <sup>27</sup> See, for example, Robert Garran, 'Most Back Defence Upgrade', *Australian*, 31 July, 2000, p 2; Collen Egan, 'Defence Spending Popular', *Australian*, 30 August 2000, p. 2; Robert Garran, 'Public Wants Cash Boost for Defence', *Australian*, 6 October 2000; and Michelle Grattan, 'The People's Defence Plan', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 November 2000, p. 1.
- <sup>28</sup> Each of these broad recommendations were accompanied or amplified by a number of more detailed recommendations and observations such as: the Army should be able to sustain combat operations in two separate locations; the maintenance of a capability edge in key areas;
- <sup>29</sup> See, for example, David Campbell, *The Social Basis of Australian and New Zealand Security Policy*, Peace Research Monograph No. 5, Peace Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 1989; Ian McAllister and Toni Makkai, 'Changing Australian Opinion on Defence: Trends, Patterns and Explanations', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 2 (December 1991), 195-235; and Toni Makkai, 'Trends in Public Opinion Towards Defence and Foreign Affairs in Australia', paper presented to the ADSC conference on *Defence and Australia: A Public Symposium on the Defence Green Paper*, Canberra, 8 August 2000.
- <sup>30</sup> See the ADSC website: <<http://idun.itsc.adfa.edu.au/ADSC/Grnpaper/papers/Makkaippt/sld001.htm>>
- <sup>31</sup> Joint Standing Committee on Foreign affairs, Defence and Trade, *From Phantom to Force: Towards a More Efficient and Effective Army* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), pp. 48 and 45.