

Bruce Cameron

"Australia is too closely beholden to America with respect to its Defence and Foreign policies. There's no need to refer to 'apron strings' ... everyone knows the topic. But why would such a view be so common?

The reason ... everyone is expected to trust our politicians, intelligence agencies and senior defence officers. But we only see some of them some of the time and when we do, we don't get to ask questions. Our 'trust' has seen Australia involved in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Will this be the same in the future?

The structure of our society is flawed and unless the fundamental problem is addressed, things will continue as they always have.

There is a logic to decision making related to Defence strategy: intelligence staff identify the threat and estimate the warning time; military planners determine contingency plans and consequent force structure, readiness states, and need for the support of allied nations; defence staff determine manufacturing and stocking policies in accord with lead times. This is all done on trust as far as Australians are concerned. Should this be any different?

Intelligence briefings, warning times, contingency plans, lead times etc are all highly confidential (top secret even). Such information can't be made public. But, a nation's commitment to war requires the support of its people.

How can 'trust' be improved to the extent necessary so that our military commitments have the confidence and backing of the nation as a whole? This is the fundamental question that has to be answered. Traditional responses such as requiring greater oversight of decision making by Parliament, have not worked to date. It is hard to imagine a solution which fits within the democratic framework that currently exists and would be supported.

What if it was to be suggested that a panel of eminent Australians be chosen to act as an interface between politicians and society ... would this work? Undoubtedly not (just imagine the arguments related to the selections of panel members!). This is interesting, I can nominate many Australians who I would trust completely in such a role.

So, we have democracy on one hand, but are hampered by it on the other. Could a referendum on any proposed military commitment be the answer? How could it, given the national security implications associated with the arguments for and against?

We could ask that the PM, Minister for Defence etc to brief the Australian people fully on the circumstances involved ... more so than has happened in the past; but in the end, it's the Government which has to be able to act decisively. The fundamental issue remains ... how to create a level of 'trust' in those who act on our behalf?

I think it's a task well above my pay scale."