

Contesting ideas: the importance of encouraging critical discussion to the future of Australian air power

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Air power is not a static concept; rather it must be studied, reflected upon, debated, and challenged. As air-minded members of the profession of arms, Air Force personnel have a responsibility to participate in this contest of ideas. It is far, far better that we should respectfully engage in that contest than to hide our thoughts, only to find them wanting when it matters most.

Air Marshal Leo Davies, Chief of Air Force,
August 2017¹

The effectiveness of Australian air power depends on the intellect of the airmen that employ it.² Such a statement may seem trite at first but the reality is that airmen spend precious little time developing their faculties for reasoning and critical thinking.

There are many reasons why critical thinking skills attract such little attention but, in my experience, one of the main factors is the heavy focus placed on technical mastery. There is a

culturally engrained belief that knowledge of and proficiency in tactics, systems and processes are the key to effective air power. This belief has been enabled by the favourable technology gap that Western militaries have enjoyed since the end of World War 2.

Although technology will continue to play an important role in providing a qualitative edge over some adversaries, global military modernisation is reducing the West's accustomed technological advantage, making it increasingly difficult and costly to maintain a qualitative edge through technology alone. Success in the future battlespace will therefore rest on the development of innovative and creative approaches, and organisation of military force that will provide a capability advantage, albeit a transitory one, over future adversaries.

In the US, the development of the Obama-era 'Third Offset Strategy' was an explicit response to this emerging challenge. In outlining the



strategy, then-Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work placed critical and innovative thinking about new operational concepts and organisational structures on par with the development of new technologies in the pursuit of continued strategic advantage for the US military.³ The situation is no different in Australia.

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) is in the process of becoming one of the most technologically sophisticated air forces in the world. However, the introduction into service of the F-35A Lightning II, P-8A Poseidon and EA-18G Growler alone will not provide the RAAF with a capability edge over adversaries in the future battlespace. There is no question that the RAAF will rapidly adapt to the introduction of these and other new systems—and will no doubt achieve a high degree of technical mastery in the operation.

However, a high level of technical proficiency in the operation of systems will be a necessary though not sufficient condition for future success. Achieving and maintaining an advantage over our future adversaries will require innovative approaches to the way air power is developed, organised and employed. Innovative applications of air power require airmen who can understand context, anticipate change, and adapt the development and application of air power in response to complex operational challenges as they emerge.

The RAAF understands this; ongoing improvements to the professional military education and training system since 2009, and the creation of Plan JERICHO in 2015, reflect a commitment to developing professional mastery and innovative thinking at both the individual and organisational level. But there are limits to the current system. Air Force professional military education and training remains skewed towards providing knowledge, not developing critical thinking or argumentation skills.

As a result, the RAAF lacks effective mechanisms and processes to foster critical discussion within the organisation. Without these mechanisms in place, the RAAF cannot develop, let alone exploit, the diversity of thought and perspectives that provide the foundation for the innovative application of air power.

This is not to suggest that RAAF policies, doctrines and operational concepts are not regularly

subjected to internal critique. Any visitor to a crew room or mess will undoubtedly hear robust and lively debate on various aspects of Air Force life and operations; however, these types of unstructured discussions add little to organisational and operational innovation. Mess debate rarely involves the in-depth analysis of key issues and validation of core assumptions that separates the airing of grievances from effective argumentation. Although useful as an outlet for voicing opinions on the organisation, these are not the forums for engaging in the contest of ideas that is needed.

Outlets for critical discussion and debate on Australian air power issues do exist; the *Australian Defence Force Journal* and the Air Power Development Centre's working paper series provide a means through which to draw attention to current and future air power issues. However, they are not often used by airmen; the length and academic style requirements for these publications have acted as a deterrent for many to contribute. What has been lacking, until recently, has been a less formal and less academically rigorous outlet for debate that is more accessible for those unwilling or unable to invest the significant time required to research and write a 3500+ word article conforming with academic writing standards.

A positive sign that progress is being made to create a more accessible means to engage in critical discussion has been the burgeoning of public online and digital forums addressing Australian defence issues over the past couple of years. Blogs such as Army's *The Cove* and the Williams Foundation's *The Central Blue*, podcasts like *The Dead Prussian* and actual physical forums such as the 'Defence Entrepreneurs' Forum-Australia' have diversified the character and content of public debate on defence issues.⁴

The *Australian Defence Force Journal* has introduced an opinion/commentary section, simplifying requirements and thereby encouraging more serving members to articulate ideas and engage in critical discussions. Although these new outlets may not require strict adherence to academic strictures, they still place a premium on reasoning and expression, thereby promoting the development of effective argumentation skills.

The public nature of these forums does, however, limit their utility as a forum for candid critical

discussion on certain topics. Contributions must be unclassified, which severely limits the scope of the topics that can be discussed and the depth of the analysis and discussion that can be engaged in. Even if the topic is not of a classified nature, there are risks associated with the promotion of critical debate on organisational issues in public forums. The furore surrounding Captain Sally Williamson's opinion piece on 'Sex and War: a conversation Army has to have' that appeared on Army's *Land Power Forum* on 6 November 2017, and was removed on 15 November, highlights how the discussion of defence matters in public forums can be counterproductive.⁵

But learning how to engage in public discussion in an appropriate and constructive way is itself an important part of an educational process that aims to develop professional mastery in the workforce. We should not be shying away from the challenges of engaging in critical discussions in the public domain by creating unnecessarily burdensome hoops to be jumped through before publication. Instead, we should develop mechanisms and procedures that integrate educational, mentoring, editorial and approval roles into a simple and timely process to support members engaging in professional discussion on issues that matter to Air Force.

Ideally, this should be implemented at the local command level. Commanders have the responsibility to develop their workforce towards the attainment of professional mastery. This responsibility extends to fostering the development of critical thinking and argumentation skills necessary to engage in the contest of ideas that will play a key role in generating the creative and innovative approaches to air power needed to ensure a continued capability advantage into the future.

The creation of an ecosystem of outlets for the critical discourse is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for the promotion of a contest of ideas about the future of Australian air power. What is needed is for airmen to become active within the various forums, presenting their ideas, defending them, challenging those of others, and modifying their views based on the progress of the debate. This will require a cultural shift within Air Force that sees participation in the open debate on air power issues as not only permitted but actively encouraged, mentored and supported.

This is starting to occur at the higher level of the organisation as Chief of Air Force's comment quoted at the opening of this commentary attests. However, the risks associated with public comment generate an understandable reticence among some senior officers to encourage open debate. This needs to change.

Not every subject of interest to defence is amenable to public discussion, nor is every airman suited to engaging in public debate. However, we need to find a way to enable those with ideas to disseminate, have them tested, validated, adapted and, if appropriate, implemented in order to ensure that Australian air power is in the best possible position to success into the future.

This contest of ideas will be critical to ensuring that Air Force is ready and able to adapt to the dynamic and complex operating environments of the future. Accordingly, we must start to view the development of critical thinking skills and the fostering of critical discussions within Air Force as key components of our strategy to maintain a competitive advantage over future adversaries. We must not fear debate, we must encourage it.

Notes

- 1 'A Central Blue debrief with Air Marshal Leo Davies, AO, CSC – Chief of Air Force', *The Central Blue* [website], 20 August 2017, available at <<http://centralblue.williamsfoundation.org.au/a-central-blue-debrief-with-air-marshal-leo-davies-ao-csc-chief-of-air-force/>> accessed 9 January 2018.
- 2 Air Force has adopted 'airmen' as a gender-neutral term covering both sexes.
- 3 Bob Work, 'National Defense University Convocation', speech to National Defense University, 5 August 2014, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Article/605598>> accessed 28 November 2017.
- 4 'The Cove', <<https://www.cove.org.au/>>; 'The Central Blue', <<http://centralblue.williamsfoundation.org.au/>>; 'The Dead Prussian', <<http://www.thedeadprussian.com/>>; and 'DEF Australia', *Grounded Curiosity* [website], <<https://groundedcuriosity.com/category/defaus>> all accessed 9 January 2018.
- 5 Sam McPhee, 'Australian Army captain recommends soldiers should be visited on the front line by prostitutes to "relieve stress"', *Daily Mail* [website], 4 December 2017, available at <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5141151/Australian-army-captain-says-prostitutes-allowed.html>> accessed 9 January 2018.