9th November 2014

Defence Policy Paper Submission

I am giving this submission as a psychiatrist who sees Defence patients, as someone who is involved in the South-Asian and Islamic communities as a community leader and as a journalist who is interested in public affairs.

My experience of seeing many Army personnel gives me an impression of a whole range of reasons why someone might go into the Army. It may vary from a family tradition to simply wanting a job with the opportunities for travel to an aggressive streak wanting to have a legal avenue to shoot guns and others who are drawn to the strict structure and comraderie. In my experience of treating patients it is critical that the Army have a strong sense of purpose. It is interesting to note where personnel did not feel the nature of their project or mission had a meaningful basis they were far more likely to suffer psychological decline as a result of their experience.

However this is not a mental health related submission. I include it as a preface that the modern Defence Forces are obviously in an era of change regarding their purpose. Modern day threats or requirements for Defence are very different to standard state to state interactions. There are far more non-state threats and the unique capabilities of Defence are often better utilised in the areas such as disaster relief, humanitarian work or peace keeping.

From my ethnic background as a Bangladeshi Australian I have vivid memories of the Army. The Army has ruled on and in off countries in South Asia for several decades, particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh. It remains a prestigious position and much sought after role. The Army controls some of the most important resources, be it business and otherwise, and there is always an unspoken understanding the Government depends upon them for being in power. No such status exists in Australia when tied to the Army. The average person would have little interaction with people working for the Army. Likewise, it is rare to get major strategic thinkers at high levels of Government within the Army which is a problem. There are unique aspects to the Military experience that could make stronger contributions to the realms of public policy. Not unlike the Church the Military has become particularly sidelined in public affairs to our detriment.

With regards to the Army’s broader purpose there is a natural overlap with our foreign policy. Within the Islamic community particularly there is always considerable angst about excursions to the Middle East which consistently look primarily related to an alliance with the US and not any strategic or moral perspectives directly tied to the domestic situation. This may have merit to the broader strategic and security position of Australia but the missions themselves can appear uninspiring or worse irrelevant.

At the same time I have definitely observed a degree of pride when Australia has been involved in peace keeping or humanitarian missions within our part of the world. This is particularly the case with the Solomon Islands and other work. While this is criticised by some as a kind of neo-colonialism it is, in my experience, seen as a legitimate and modern use of Australian Security Forces. Likewise Australian Defence Forces were widely praised
in their work in the recent Philippines natural disaster. There is also a degree of coordination with other groups such as NGOs which I think are a model for the future. Good cooperation with the wide variety of private not-for-profit and Governmental groups engaging in relatively brief projects within very tight parameters perhaps offer a model where the Defence Forces can be most useful. I note here that my sister worked for Save the Children London and was involved in running a field hospital with the Australian Defence Forces.

At a more fundamental level the prime purpose of the Defence Forces is still to maintain security for the country within a very fast changing world. This will require for it to be nimble and have possibly different aspects to its function which may entail different types of training and units.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Tanveer Ahmed
MBBS FRANZCP
Consultant Psychiatrist