



2017 RUSI TASMANIA BLAMEY ORATION

National-level Operations – Achieving strategic results through ‘Joined-Up’ government

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I am going to start this address with a story. It is a personal one, so bear with me. I will contrast the modern-day challenges of achieving national strategic coherence with the demands of leadership which Field Marshal Blamey knew as Commander-in-Chief. I am enlisting the past to explain something of the present.

In 1991 I had the great good fortune to interview a then elderly Lieutenant Colonel Phil Rhoden on the topic of the raising of the Citizens’ Military Forces after the Second World War. When we were finished and enjoying a cup of tea, in his very pleasant living room surrounded by the reminders of a successful career as a Melbourne solicitor, discussion turned to other things. He asked me, what I as an historian thought of Field Marshal Blamey?

I hummed and hawed a little. It wasn’t really my area of expertise but I had a sense of Blamey’s character and his ability. I knew all the stories, but as we do, I hadn’t formed a considered opinion – because I didn’t have to. I responded that I thought that he was the man for the moment, a strong, competent strategic leader, just who we needed to raise an Australian Imperial Force from scratch and to command it and the Australian Military Forces through six years of war. At the outbreak of the war there was probably no one else for the job.

He was a man who worked with two governments, both weak and each in their own way unprepared for the war they had to fight. Most challenging he was an Australian leader who had to deal with Douglas MacArthur, perhaps the most difficult alliance partner it was possible to have.

‘But’, I concluded my remarks, ‘I find it very difficult to forgive him for his remarks at the parade at Koitaki’. ‘I’m, glad that you said that’, he said, ‘I felt the men surge behind me, but their discipline held. They did take it very badly though.’ At that stage the hair went up on the back of my neck when it clicked that this delightful, gentle man had commanded the 2/14th Battalion on that parade. The parade is now seventy-five years ago come November. He had been there when Blamey uttered the line that ‘It’s the rabbit that runs who gets shot’.

These men had just fought the Japanese to a standstill on the Kokoda track. Many of them believed that their own commander had accused them of cowardice. I won't re-litigate the dispute over what was said, or what was intended. As my grandfather used to say of his wartime experience, 'Let the dead past bury its dead'.

But on that day I learned one thing which has stayed with me since. That historical memory needs to be warts and all. We do no favours to future history, or to our present endeavours by glossing over the personality flaws, competence, errors and successes of those charged with leading our country in peace and war. Blamey was a man of his time. I doubt that any present Australian leader, military or civilian would survive very long in their jobs if they behaved as he sometimes did. To a certain extent that is hypocritical of me, even as Commander-in-Chief Blamey did not live in the media spotlight that we know today. But Blamey did not use the media of his day very well and he seemed oblivious to the importance of mobilising public opinion.

People and their relationships with each other are the essence of history. So while I will not judge, I will be frank about what works and what we have yet to do.

The changing face of leadership

When I was asked to give this Blamey oration I pulled out David Horner's excellent books, Hetherington's and Carlyon's memoirs of Blamey and I consulted works on Menzies and Curtin. I consulted the 50th anniversary memorial edition of the Australian Defence Force Journal commemorating Blamey. [1]

One of the most interesting sources that I found was a very gracious Blamey oration delivered by General Sir Francis Hassett to the RUSI of NSW in 1993. Sir Francis recalled having had to front the then General Blamey when Blamey was displeased with him. He had no cause to like Blamey, but he clearly respected him. Perhaps his highest praise was reserved for the fact that Blamey 'understood government and how to work with it'. [2]

The ability to work effectively within government is what distinguishes an effective strategic leader from a competent tactical leader. Australia excels in producing excellent tactical and operational leaders but throughout our history we have struggled at the strategic level.

Where the history of Australia's involvement in the Second World War bears greatest comparison with our own time is in the struggle for strategic cohesion. Cohesion, or being strategically 'joined-up', is what I wish to address today.

As an official War Historian of the Second World War Paul Hasluck describes this challenge in terms that should resonate today, but which I fear do not. During six years of war Australia was called on to adjust its ideas about the nature and extent of national resources and the method of employing them. It was forced to

look at last on its own place in the world, to measure its own capacity as a nation and to assess its relations with other nations in the exact terms of waging war. Its people had to come together as one people in one effort. It came to understand in more brutal terms what its claim to nationhood meant and to meet the stark and single issue of survival. [3]

Blamey's appointment as a Field Marshal recognises the fact that his war was fought at the strategic level. We have many better loved leaders and more notable combat commanders but to him fell the unenviable role of providing strategic advice to militarily illiterate political leaders in a world where the pace of events outstripped even our time.

I want to emphasise this apparent contradiction. My staff quite rightfully point out that I am being inconsistent when I suggest that the pace of events in 1939-42 (and 1914-18 for that matter) outstrips our own era given that I also argue that our era seems so much more complex than in the past. They are correct. What I am saying is that great world wars were settled with almost inconceivable brutality and bloodshed in a compact period. Whereas now, great conflicts are attenuated over time, and the characteristics of those conflicts are very different from those fought by mass forces in decisive battles and campaigns.

Leaders need to behave in fundamentally different ways according to the demands of the circumstances that confront them. I can name a number of contemporary senior officers who I believe would have fulfilled the role of Commander-in-Chief during the Second World War with great distinction. But the point is that we were a much smaller country in 1939 and despite the experience of 1914-18, we had pitifully few civilian and military leaders who had the experience, education and training that prepared them for national leadership in Total War. Blamey was a clear choice for the roles that he filled.

Effective leadership is critical if a state, or a coalition, is to prevail in war. But leadership in every conflict is different. President Lincoln spent years finding generals who could fight the new kind of war that he faced. The history of both World Wars is about the race to find leaders who could conceive of alternatives to attrition. Our era requires leaders who can optimise the effect of the available resources without necessarily having the positional authority over those resources. The cost of not being able to mobilise collective international campaigns is measured in the spread of the new world disorder. Ultimately it is paid for in lives.

What worked before will not work now. We need to learn how to fight in the Digital Age. We expect so much more of our junior personnel in terms of knowledge and initiative. And what we demand of our organisational structures needs to be fundamentally different than in past conflicts.

Now I am going to leave Blamey because nothing that I will say now will add or detract from his position as Australia's greatest general. But I will repeat the observation that what worked for Blamey would not work now. In the glare of

24/7 media coverage, in an environment where military operations are intrinsically part of a whole-of-government effort I do not believe that his approach to leadership would work at all. This observation is not a criticism of Blamey, or any of his contemporaries. They were products of their own era, just as we are products of ours. And our era is turning out to provide existential challenges that require us to be far more creative in our strategic response.

How leadership must adjust to circumstances

In terms that would be familiar to Paul Hasluck we do not appear to have looked on our place in the world and determined how one people, exerting one effort, will fight the wars that we are already engaged in.

And in terms that John Curtin would recognise, it is frustrating that the Australian strategic default is to delegate responsibility for upholding national values and physical security to those in uniform. You may remember that Curtin struggled to communicate to the Australian population the need to mobilise to meet the threat to Australia. [4] In our turn it can appear that many Australians think that life will simply continue as it has through the boom years and that the breakdown in the international order will not affect us.

I want to invoke David Kilcullen's Blamey Oration last year in Canberra. David is an old friend and will not mind me using his excellent address as a launching pad for my own observations. Titled the 'Dragon and the Snakes: Emerging and Future Security Threats in the Post-Cold War Order' David described the 'breakdown between categories of war and crime, domestic and international, physical and cyber'. David suggested that it might be tempting to think we could withdraw from the world, pull up the drawbridge and simply put in place a series of domestic defensive measures in order to protect ourselves at home. There are two problems with that: on the one hand, there is no drawbridge. We are connected to the global system whether we like it or not, and as a maritime nation with a huge territory, a small population, and an economy built on trade, we need to remain connected to that system. [5]

What characterises our current strategic dilemma is that nothing we do remains within bounds. Our traditional model of siloing responsibility for strategy, foreign policy, policing, border control, cyber security into discrete departments of state needs to adjust to a world where conflict, including violent conflict, can no longer be seen as the exclusive province of the military.

What is more, coordination cannot begin and end at the committee level in Canberra, or in Washington, or London. Future national campaigns need to involve the networked application of many different aspects of national power and those networks need to operate at all levels right down into field operations.

What 'joined-up' means

It is worthwhile dwelling on what coordination means in today's world – particularly as we live in an era of instantaneous digital communications where

we have the whole world on speed-dial.

Contemporary management literature focuses on the 'adaptive approach', managing complex problems while at the same time acknowledging that many of the problems we face defy resolution in any meaningful way.

The Harvard Business School's Professor Ronald Heifetz is renowned for his work on distributed leadership models, demonstrating that complex problems in the digital age cannot be solved using the siloed hierarchical leadership structures that were developed to deal with the mass industrial and military systems of the Industrial Age. The adaptive approach recognises that few answers to contemporary problems are found in the senior executive's office. If you want to win through in the current economy you need to free up the workforce to innovate. Limiting leadership functions to the managerial class is a recipe for business failure. [6]

In the national security sphere the importance of clear strategic direction, backed up by flexible responses, clear communications and radical delegation is even more important. The recently published lessons report from Australia's Whole-of-Government mission in Afghanistan makes a number of recommendations. These can be summarised as requiring an integrated, whole-of-government approach in the planning; policy direction; field operations; and leadership dimensions of every future Australian overseas deployment. [7]

Even after two decades of continuous offshore deployments, involving military, police, diplomats, aid officials, defence civilians and public service legal and governance experts we still manage our deployments in stovepipes rather than as 'one people in one effort'.

The lessons of contemporary operations demonstrate how current conflict differs from the experience of World War and Cold War. Reflecting on the problems of defeating protean, networked terrorist systems in Iraq and Afghanistan former US commander General Stanley McChrystal points out that 'accelerating speed and interdependence in today's world have created levels of complexity that confound even the most superbly efficient industrial age establishments'. [8] Nowhere is this more obvious in fighting loosely organised entities whose notion of war bears little resemblance to our own. In his 2015 best-seller *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* General McChrystal criticises the inherent inflexibility in hierarchical and siloed organisations and argues for leadership across missions that is based on:

- establishing trust and common purpose;
- emphasising purpose over process;
- seeking radical transparency; and
- building strong connections between teams.

He concludes that: 'The speed and interdependence of the modern environment create complexity. Coupling shared consciousness and empowered execution creates an adaptable organization able to react to complex problems.'

So what . . .

No presentation such as this one should simply admire the problem. We cannot judge our predecessors of 70 years ago unless we are willing to apply the same standards of discomfiting rigour to our own performance. I was reminded of this when I pulled Paul Hasluck's magisterial contribution to Australia's Official History of the shelf. Weighing in at 644 pages *The Government and the People* was published in 1952 – only seven years after the war ended. It is to the Australian War Memorial's credit that it has embarked on official histories of Iraq, Afghanistan and East Timor but that project only started in 2016. During the First and Second World Wars we had historians working on the job during hostilities, now we wait until it is too late to capture history as it happens.

One initiative that we are progressing in government is the gathering and analysis of whole-of-government lessons for Australia's offshore operations. This work should be seen as the first draft of history. This responsibility belongs to my organisation, the Australian Civil-Military Centre, though we are not resourced to do the task on anything more than an 'as required' basis. But we continue to develop processes to ensure that the lessons of coordination are fed back to the agencies that comprise our own team-of-teams. 'Lessons Learned' at the national level may be a new initiative, but as strategic challenges multiply exponentially they are essential if we are remain ahead of strategic decision cycles.

Not surprisingly we face obstacles including the usual bureaucratic inertia, not a little turf protection and more commonly, sheer lack of understanding as to why we are doing it at all. But as the Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr Martin Parkinson put it in 2015: "very few countries think about policy interconnectedness in a strategic fashion. Indeed, very few countries could be said to do 'joined-up' government at all well as there is a recurring lack of coordination between the strategic, military and economic institutions across nations. While it may be hard for any country to achieve this outcome, and perhaps harder still for democracies, history suggests that those which do can have a disproportionate influence at key times in history." [9]

We need to invest more effort into ensuring that operational lessons are accepted and adopted across government. And when I say 'we', I mean 'I'. It is my job, or one of them, and I too spend too much time balancing scarce resources rather than cutting through to establish this capability for government.

One area where we are making progress is at the behavioural level, if not at the policy level. I am not too concerned about that. Policy generally follows behaviours, not the other way around. Policy is ultimately derived from observations about what constitutes an effective working culture and culture is the result of a pattern of individual and collective behaviours. You cannot mandate cross-agency performance through policies created in any single department of state – even a central agency. But you can certainly build good interagency behaviours when you engage with staff at the working level.

Over the eight years of the Australian Civilian-Military Centre's existence we have tracked a remarkable improvement in joined-up behaviours. Interestingly, while improved processes such as the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework have played their part, the greatest change has been in the better working relationships forged by individuals and teams across agency boundaries. In large part this is the result of a generation of civilian, military and police staff who have served together in building operations in Australia and overseas. But it is also due to the much more deliberate approach that departments have taken on engaging in interagency exercises; joint education; and collaborative training.

Finally, we are not alone in the endeavour of building the joined-up approach within government and between coalition partners. We learn from our friends and allies. In Britain the 'joined-up' approach is government policy and has been for years. Initially adopted from NATO doctrine as the 'Comprehensive Approach', the British now prefer the term 'Integration'.

By that they mean that simply coordinating across agencies does not work at the project level, when time is critical and when you are facing an adaptive enemy. As my colleagues at the multi-agency UK Stabilisation Unit put it: "Integration is forming a single multi-disciplinary and multi-departmental team to take on a task . . . When asked to work together government departments generally look to liaise or coordinate, to retain their own teams whilst negotiating with other departments. Experience from the field has shown in the complex, fast moving and highly pressurised environment of conflict this does not work. The transactional costs are too high."

Integration is primarily driven by the process of people from different institutions and different disciplines working side by side at several levels to ensure that their perspectives and activities reinforce each other. Integration requires low-level cooperation and mid-level coordination, supplemented by high-level alignment of overall strategic objectives. Integration should improve the flow of information, contribute to a shared understanding of stabilisation challenges and responses, reduce policy and delivery 'silos', and ensure greater effect on the ground. [10]

Now I want to return to that living room in Melbourne 26 years ago. Lieutenant Colonel Phil Rhoden was a member of our great generation who fought in Syria, Lebanon, New Guinea and Borneo. I knew him as a dignified elder citizen, but at war he was a hard young man and an inspiring leader who embarked on six years of war not knowing whether he would survive, or whether we would win. He was not a strategic leader, he worked at the tactical level. But he would recognise what we know to be true today.

If we wish to prevail in a world of irreconcilable strategic challenges we need cohesion across all the civilian, military and police agencies engaged in conflict. And to do that we must break down the silos and embrace new ways of integrating our efforts. We need to further professionalise our workforce, radically delegate to multi-departmental teams and focus on building common

purpose across government.

What worked in the past will be of little utility in current conflict. We need to think past coordination being little more than interdepartmental negotiation and we need to start designing multi-agency cooperative taskforces, that are configured and re-configure to meet the changing demands of conflict. These taskforces need to be configured at every level, but need to start with senior interagency policy leadership. As the lessons from Afghanistan report recommended, these taskforces 'should be bespoke, that is set up for the purpose and the duration of the mission, rather than based in any existing interdepartmental group or committee, with its composition and level determined by the nature and scale of the mission'. [11]

The imperative for strategic cohesion and making it the core of our national strategic posture is not just an Australian priority. It is one of relevance to all who are engaged in the long and diffuse era of conflict which stretches ahead. I will conclude by citing James Mattis, the United States Secretary of Defence: "In this age, I don't care how tactically or operationally brilliant you are, if you cannot create harmony—even vicious harmony—on the battlefield based on trust across service lines, across coalition and national lines, and across civilian/military lines, you need to go home, because your leadership is obsolete. We have got to have officers who can create harmony across all those lines." [12]

Notes:

[1] J. Hetherington, *Blamey controversial soldier: a biography of Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey*, Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service: Canberra, 1973; N. Carlyon, *I remember Blamey*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1980; D. Horner, *Blamey: The Commander in Chief*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998; D. Horner, *Crisis of command: Australian generalship and the Japanese threat, 1941 – 1943*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1978; D. Day, *John Curtin: A Life*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 1999; A. Martin, *Robert Menzies, A Life, Vol 1*, Melbourne University Press, 1993; P. Brune, *A bastard of a place: the Australians in Papua, Kokoda, Milne Bay, Gona, Buna, and Sanananda* (2nd edition) Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2004.

[2] General Sir Francis Hassett, 'Military Leadership', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, no. 148, May/June 2001, 53 at 63.

[3] Paul Hasluck, *The Government and the People 1939-1941, Volume 1, Series 4, Australia in the War of 1939-45*, Canberra, Australian War Memorial, 1952, 1.

[4] Day, John Curtin, Ch. 34.

[5] D. Kilcullen, 'The Dragon and the Snakes: Emerging and Future Security Threats in the Post-Cold War Order', 2016 Blamey Oration, Royal United Services Institute Canberra,
<http://www.blameyfund.org.au/images/David%20Kilcullen.pdf>

[6] R.Heifetz, A. Grashow & M. Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership; Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, Harvard Business Press, 2009; R. Heifetz and D. Laurie, 'The Work of Leadership', *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, 1997, 124-134.

[7] Australian Civil-Military Centre, *Afghanistan: Lessons from Australia's Whole-of-Government Mission*, November 2016, <https://www.acmc.gov.au/afghanistan/>

[8] Stanley McChrystal et al, *Team of Teams: New rules of engagement for a complex world*, Penguin, 2015, 6.

[9] Dr Martin Parkinson PSM, 'US Economic Diplomacy – A View from Afar', *Griswold Center for Economic Policy Studies, Working Paper No. 246*, September 2015, <https://www.princeton.edu/ceps/workingpapers/246parkinson.pdf> accessed 6 July 2016.

[10] UK Stabilisation Unit, 'The Integrated Approach is Essential', 2010, <http://sclr.stabilisationunit.gov.uk/top-ten-reads/comprehensive-integrated-approach/36-the-integrated-approach-is-essential>.

[11] Australian Civil-Military Centre, *Afghanistan: Lessons from Australia's Whole-of-Government Mission*, 9.

[12] J. Mattis, *Address to the May 2010 Joint Force Command Conference (JFCOM)*, Ares blog, *Aviation Week*, June 2010, aviationweek.com/ares, accessed 17 July 2016.