



1999 RUSI Blamey Oration

By Senator David MacGibbon

Major General Cooke, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, you do me a great honour in inviting me to present the 1999 Blamey Oration. My father knew Tom Blamey and served with him as a brother officer in the First World War. Everyone in this room is aware of the life and the importance of Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey, yet if we canvassed the Australian community aged forty or less how many would be aware of his achievements? I suspect very few.

Field Marshal Blamey was our greatest soldier. The scope of his military achievements and the responsibilities he bore makes him a significant figure in the history of our nation. But who was this man and why was he important to our nation? Thomas Albert Blamey was born on 24 January 1884 at Lake Albert near Wagga Wagga. His forebears come from Cornwall. The seventh child in a family of ten children he grew up in the isolation of the Australian bush. By all accounts he was an intelligent, conscientious hard working lad, confident in his abilities and eager to make a career for himself.

He became a pupil teacher in New South Wales and later in Western Australia. He demonstrated an interest in military affairs from an early age and through his employment in the education department became an officer of cadets. From such small beginnings grew a mighty career.

By 1910, living in Victoria he had transferred to the fledgling Citizen Military Forces as an officer. In 1912, having passed the stringent selection procedures, he attended the new British Army Staff College in Quetta.

The outbreak of the First World War found him as a Major in Great Britain, well positioned to develop his career. As a staff officer, Major Blamey joined the Australian Army headquarters forming in Egypt. He went ashore on the first morning at Gallipoli and served through that campaign.

The rest of the war saw him serving in Belgium and France with the AIF, finishing the war as a Brigadier and Chief of Staff to General Monash. His strength in the First World War was as a staff officer. He was very good in that role. If I can quote my father, the Intelligence officer of the 41st Battalion Blamey was a good staff officer. He wrote a very good operational order.

Disillusioned with an Army career in the post-war years, Blamey resigned from the regular army though maintained an active role in the Citizen Forces. In the 1930s he commanded one of the Victorian Brigades - the 10th. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War from 1931 to 1937 Blamey commanded the 3rd Division with the rank of Major General.

For eleven years, from 1925 to 1936 Blamey served as the Victorian Police Commissioner. This was a period in which Blamey became involved in much controversy. The appointment however was of considerable value to Blamey and to the nation. It gave Blamey an understanding of the Parliamentary process and Parliamentarians. He served under a range of Victorian governments. This experience enabled him to perform his duties more ably when in the next decade he became the principle military advisor to the Australian government.

Blamey's place in Australian history rests on his achievements after 1939, not before, significant though those prior attainments were. With respect to his service to the nation through the Second World War, it was the period after the entry of Japan in December 1941 which was the most valuable period of his service.

The outbreak of the Second World War saw the raising of the second AIF for service against Germany. Prime Minister Menzies appointed Major General Blamey as the Commander of the AIF. Of the seven Major Generals on the active list at the time Bennett, Blamey and Lavarack in order of seniority, were the leading contenders. In the Prime Ministers view Blamey's power of command far exceeded his rivals.

The AIF was deployed as soon as possible to the Middle East. Ultimately three divisions, the 6th, the 7th and 9th were in the Middle East and took part in the North African campaigns, and the campaigns in Greece, Crete and Syria.

There may be debate about the quality of some of Blamey's judgements as a tactical commander. However his experience as a senior staff officer from the first world war, his intimate knowledge of the British Army, and his personal knowledge of the senior British officers then in the Middle East nearly all of whom he had been a student with at staff college or with whom he had served in France, was an invaluable asset for the AIF.

One of Blamey's constant tasks was to keep the AIF together a directive, from his government. Since the AIF in both wars enjoyed a reputation second to none, the British higher command was always seeking to break up AIF formations and insert them in other units. Resisting this was a never ending battle and while Blamey was absent in Greece through that ill-fated campaign, much dispersion occurred. It took Blamey many months to reconstitute the AIF back into its formations and this created friction with the British authorities. As a consequence of the maintenance of this cohesion the Australian Army now has a record of the achievements on the battle field of the 6th, 7th and 9th Divisions a rich history which would have been denied them had they been broken up. Furthermore the Australian Army gained the experience of higher command at

divisional and corps level. Contrast this with the RAAF. The number and the bravery of RAAF aircrew in RAF Bomber Command was a major component in its success. Bomber command sustained the highest rate of casualties of any arm of any service in the Second World War Australia had over 5,000 aircrew killed in the European theatre. Because Australian air crews were posted to RAF squadrons we have no record of a discrete Australian contribution. How much better it would have been if the RAAF had had a Blamey and one of the seven groups in Bomber Command had been an Australian group, the way 6 Group with its thirteen squadrons was made up of Canadian Air Force personnel.

It is not appropriate, in this address to review in detail the actions of General Blamey in the Second World War. Nor is it possible to cover such a broad canvas in the time available. I would refer those who seek detail to the recently published biography *Blamey: The Commander in Chief* by Dr David Horner, a work of admirable scholarship.

Rather than deal with the details of Blamey's military actions post 1941, which are well documented, I would like to offer a view as a legislator. An essential starting point is an understanding of the climate in Australia at the end of 1941. Historical events must be viewed in the context of the circumstances prevailing at the time. Just as Vietnam must be seen as part of a continuum of Soviet aggression and expansion dating from the immediate post war period, so it is important to assess Blamey's actions against the background of Australia in 1941.

Prior to the entry of Japan, the war had a degree of remoteness about it a lack of urgency for Australia. The shattering force of the attack on Pearl Harbour, the over running of the whole of South East Asia, the capture of Rabaul, all in about 8 weeks created panic in Australia to a degree which few acknowledge today.

I was 7 years old. I well remember the 19th February 1942 when Darwin was bombed the first bombs on Australian soil the shock that administered to the country. As a school boy living in a coastal town north of Brisbane we only went to school for half a day through this period. The classrooms above the ground floor could not be used in case there was an air raid; every school had slit trenches and practiced air raid drills.

The Curtin Labor Government had succeeded the Menzies government prior to the entry of Japan. The Curtin Government with its strong pacifist leanings from the 1920s and 1930s was not well furnished to deal with a nation in crisis, facing a seemingly invincible enemy on its doorstep and with its armed forces in the Middle East or Europe. Despite the urgency of the situation there was no spirit of national unity which put the war as the highest priority; union affairs often took precedence over military needs.

While military affairs have been analysed and recorded in great detail through this period, no one has analysed the policies and actions of the Australian Government from 1941 to 1945. Did the government set national strategic goals and objectives? How successful was it in attaining those goals? How much

sovereignty did it surrender to the United States government or to one man General Douglas MacArthur?

This is a vital part of our national history. It needs both a military historian working with an experienced parliamentarian reading between the lines of Cabinet minutes to undertake this research. I suspect when this is done General Blamey's role will appear in an even more favourable light from a national perspective.

In my view the great service General Blamey rendered the Australian nation through the Japanese crisis was the provision of strong positive advice to the government. He was intelligent, widely experienced and unafraid to put a point of view bluntly. Whether he was right or wrong on some details is irrelevant. It fell to him, as the principal Australian military advisor to the government to be the solid sheet anchor at a time of great insecurity and he did that resolutely and fearlessly and thereby gave purpose and direction when it was most needed.

The responsibilities placed on Blamey were enormous and unreasonable. No other single Australian carried such a heavy load and carried that load without respite for the entire war. He had too many appointments: some of which provided conflicting interests all competed for his time. This was a consequence of the organisational immaturity of the command structure of the Department of Defence at that period in our history.

It is appropriate that the buildings of Australia's defence establishment, the Russell Offices in Canberra, are built around Blamey square. It preserves symbolically for future generations the central role Field Marshal Sir Thomas Blamey played in military affairs over a period of 50 years a role of such scope and importance it is never likely to be equalled by a future general.

The management of Australia's defence has changed dramatically since Blamey's time. Indeed it is more appropriate to use the words national security rather than defence because of the broader connotations of what is now involved. While there are many inputs into national security I propose to discuss in a broad and general way how the Parliament brings its influence to bear on these issues. In this discussion I do not propose to discuss the legal control or employment of the defence forces, a subject I have dealt with in a previous RUSI address.

While much has changed one inviolate principal remains and that is the Australian defence forces are still under civilian control. That civilian control is mediated through the Parliament. Compared with Blamey's years the composition of the Australian community and some of its attitudes are very different. The nature of the threats is much more diffuse and intangible and less easily identified the barrier between civilian and military activities to some degree blurred. Faced with a proliferation of international organized crime, democratic societies are increasingly using intelligence services which formerly had an exclusive military role, in the national interest to protect their communities.

Within the armed services, the Tange Report of 1974 abolished the three separate service boards and their three ministers. The concept of a unified Australian Defence Force is now well established headed by a CDF. The move towards the 3 services acting in harmony and concert with each other is laudable but it is not a necessary corollary however that the service chiefs should be reduced to their present state of irrelevance.

Total power now lies in the hands of the CDF of the day subject only to the intervention of the Minister or the Government. This is a highly dangerous situation. Authority must be restored to the service chiefs and the' higher management of the ADF should take place through the chiefs of staff committee with the CDF as Chairman of the committee, the first amongst equals. Chiefs of Staff should be the epitome of professional knowledge and experience in their service. That professional knowledge must be used. There will not be a relapse into three uncoordinated warring services if authority is restored to them.

One of the worrying aspects of the current officer corps is the conformity of views within its ranks. Certainly there must be unity of purpose and the obedience of orders but that does not mean the denial of debate in the appropriate circumstances. How different from the origins of the Australian Army where my father told me that at all of Monash's briefings the most junior of officers was encouraged to put his views. We have never nurtured a culture of individual thought in any of the Australian services. We have produced no Liddell Harts or Fullers and for that we are the poorer. In an environment of shrinking promotional opportunities the tendency towards conformity is markedly increasing. It is precisely the wrong time to invest a CDF with absolute powers unless we subscribe to the mythology of an infallible CDF. Ironically the powers sought from the government by General Blamey when he was Commander in Chief now parallel the powers of the CDF. The government of the day quite properly refused those powers to General Blamey.

There are two other significant difference from Blamey's time. Current circumstances demand a force in being. This in turn requires a significant regular component in all three services. We no longer enjoy a 12 or 18 month preparatory period in which to raise and train a defence force. Secondly the electronic age has made available a huge and rapidly changing array of military hardware. It is now essential that defence is an informed customer aware of all the opportunities provided and most importantly possessed of the flexibility to exploit technical change rapidly.

Against this changed background how does the Parliament as a whole exert its influence on defence matters? It does this in two broad based ways by demanding accountability and contributing to policy matters.

Before we examine these two areas let us look first at the men and women; the senators and members who are going to exert the influence. Members of Parliament are drawn from the community at large. As such defence is not a dominant issue in their lives, any more that it is for the average citizen. Very few

members of parliament now have never been in uniform and that situation will not change in the foreseeable future.

Defence is specialized area complex and intellectually demanding. It does require consistent application to be informed and there are no teachers to provide inspiration or guidance. Furthermore preferment within the parliamentary system is much more likely to occur by demonstrating an interest in activities which have a higher community profile than defence. The parliament once enjoyed the luxury of having Major General Sir Neville Howse VC as Minister for Defence and Major General Sir William Glasgow, the commander of the first division in 1918 in that role also. Those days are long gone.

The significance of the present situation is that Defence must come to the Parliament and put its case. This is entirely alien to the culture of the ADF. I will argue that the ADF has no option but to embark on a marketing campaign with the Parliament to educate the Parliament of its needs. This has to be done with great care and done ethically and on a continuing basis. Unless it raises its profile, the Defence vote or budget will continue to decline.

I said earlier that the Parliament exercises its influence principally through accountability and policy inputs. Defence as a subject generates the barest minimum of legislation unlike every other Department. Further most decisions in relation to defence, under the Westminster system are the province of the executive government. In other words Cabinet makes decisions in relation to defence and foreign affairs without the need to debate or legislate within the parliament. The executive government does have the dominant role in relation to defence policies and activities.

Having made that caveat it should not be assumed that the Parliament has no powers in relation to defence matters. The Parliament does possess very real powers and those are most frequently employed in relation to accountability although they are not restricted to accountability alone.

Paternal government has long been out of favour in Australia. The public does want to know what its government is doing particularly in relation to the expenditure of money. This is a good and healthy interest. In turn the Parliament must know what the public service is up to and how money is being spent.

Financial accountability is pursued specifically in the Australian Parliament by the Senate Estimates Committees which are now called Legislative Committees. There is a Legislation Committee covering each federal department. The Senate Legislative Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade examines the proposed expenditure for the Department of Defence.

The powers of most parliamentary committees are very great and they are defined in their individual resolution of appointment. Most include the powers to send for persons and documents which gives the committee virtually unlimited power.

Having to account for the expenditure of large sums of money is a great discipline. The committee can pursue not only proposed expenditure in the current budget but how funds were spent in the past and to some degree prospective expenditure.

Properly used the Defence Legislative Committee provides a marvelous opportunity for the department to inform the parliament on its current outlays the reasons why they are being made and creates the opportunity to indicate future needs. The Department has never been able to see what a positive asset this is. It brings to the table an adversarial mindset coupled with a policy of minimal disclosure. This is all quite pointless.

Lately a most disturbing trend has emerged. It has always been an absolute rule that any witness appearing before a parliamentary committee, whether they are under oath or not, must tell the truth. The recent McIntosh/Prescott inquiry into the Collins submarine program has confirmed that some officers of the department have indulged in a consistent pattern of deliberately providing false information to the parliament.

If a witness feels that a question breaches national security either the minister at the table should rule on the matter or the witness stays silent. At the end of the day if a committee wishes to know the answer to a question that question must be answered and there are effective procedures by which confidentiality can be maintained.

There are no grounds for tendering information that a witness knows to be false. This principle is so important that the parliament should impose a mandatory prison sentence on any one who gives false evidence to the parliament.

While the decision to appoint the McIntosh/Prescott inquiry was an initiative of the current Minister for Defence it is clear that a succession of inadequate answers at successive committee hearings forced the decision for an inquiry.

But accountability is not restricted to financial matters. It covers the whole spectrum of the department and its agencies. One of the fundamental requirements for a defence department is accurate and timely intelligence. Australia makes large and increasing outlays for intelligence collection through 5 agencies spread over 4 departments. It is an anomalous situation that Australia alone amongst western democratic nations has no effective parliamentary oversight over any of its intelligence agencies. The only parliamentary committee the Joint Statutory Committee on ASIO is totally ineffectual.

Under the Act it is forbidden to inquire into any matter relating to foreign intelligence, any matter relating to a foreign national, any operational matter or any complaint about the organisation. Defence sponsors two agencies, the Defence Signals Directorate and the Defence Intelligence Organisation. The Parliament simply has no information on which to assess the quality or effectiveness of any intelligence agency. Effective parliamentary oversight of all agencies is long overdue and is given added urgency by the apparent

shortcomings in relation to such critical events in our region as the Sandline affair and the PNG Taiwan alliance.

Apart from accountability the parliament has a role in policy formulation. The Defence Sub of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade has a long and honourable history of well researched and well-argued reports. These reports have covered such issues as Force Structure, Resignation Rates, Reserves, Stockholding policy and Officer Training to name a few. In the immediate past it has taken a proactive role in two different areas. In the last parliament it was apparent to the committee that an unprecedented level of expenditure was looming for new capital equipment in about 10 years' time. The magnitude of this expenditure is such that if presented unannounced to the parliament it would be deemed unaffordable with dire consequences for the capabilities of the ADF. It therefore conducted an inquiry, with only luke warm support from the department, in an attempt to quantify the level of expenditure and to bring to the notice of the parliament and the community what lies ahead because with adequate financial planning what needs to be done is affordable.

That report has been constructive because there now is discussion in the appropriate circles about the financing problem. Last month the Committee tabled its Military Justice Report the most complex inquiry it has ever conducted. Through the inquiry the Committee became aware of perceptions amongst some of the families of members of the ADF who had been killed on exercises relating to the independence of the military justice system. While the Committee found no evidence of a lack of independence in the processes such perceptions are important. Whether true or false they are very damaging for the reputation of the ADF in the wider community. The report of the committee addressed this matter of independence by recommending the use of an existing but unused power under the Defence Inquiry Regulations which if adopted, will create both the perception and the reality of independence in the inquiry process.

Parliament has one more vital role in policy issues. The very nature of military affairs creates a conservative environment in the literal sense. Change comes slowly in military establishments and for most of history this has been no major impediment. But we now live in a world of very rapid technological change. The successful exploitation of new technology is more crucial for Australia with its large geographical area and small population than any other country. Yes, there are risks in this and in some cases we have to act on our own and make our own decisions. Informed parliamentary policy in relation to technology can have a constructive role in making the ADF competitive on the modern battlefield.

Sir Thomas Blamey devoted his life to serving his country. The maintenance of that national security now rests with us, his successors. The problems we face are far less acute but probably more complex and more difficult than those of his era but we have many more resources to draw upon. If we analyse and prepare carefully and thoughtfully we can preserve those freedoms bequeathed to us by Sir Thomas Blamey and his brothers in arms.