

Speech to the Kokoda Foundation's 'Future Challenges for the Australia-United States Strategic Relationship' Seminar-Dinner, by Trevor J Thomas, Editor-in-Chief, Australian Defence Business Review, 2 November 2006. [Check against delivery]

Thanks Ross,
Defence Minister Nelson, Secretary Smith, CDF Houston, Distinguished International Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

The year 2007 will be a big year for many in the audience tonight. From the Australian perspective:

- The Government will face the people yet again in a Federal election that will see political leaders from both sides judged not only for their performance over the current term, but also for the attractiveness of the 'vision' put forward for the next three years.
- In May, the 2007/08 Budget will provide further visibility into Department of Defence activities benefiting from both the Government's commitment to sustain real Defence spending, as well as the framing of a revised program of capability acquisitions as recently presented in the 2006 Defence Capability Plan.
- Also, we will celebrate the tenth anniversary of the foundation of Australian Defence Business Review magazine. As is appropriate, there are some surprises in store for that year in terms of new ADBR product releases which will cement the orientation and operations of the magazine for the next ten years.

Although ADBR will be ten years old itself in 2007, my own involvement in Defence publishing began much earlier. In 1989 - and having just concluded a 10-year career in industry policy consulting - I took over the Editorship of the then fortnightly Defence Industry & Aerospace Report newsletter, which had been founded eight years earlier.

I recall one of my first formal meetings was with the then Head of Defence Public Relations. After enthusiastically outlining my plan to develop the DIAR publication into a fully fledged and inquiring defence business journal, he curiously questioned whether, firstly: there would be enough material on that subject to justify a fortnightly publication; and secondly, would anybody be interested in reading it?

How times have changed, especially given the Department of Defence and Defence Materiel Organisation have just published their 2005/06 annual reports which, combined, total over seven hundred pages!

So after some initial fumbling around by me to secure the content, the printed (then DIAR) newsletter was evolved into a magazine format, and started to really find its feet upon the publication of Roger Price's early-1990s work into the future role of

Government, in terms of its continuing ownership of defence materiel production facilities.

In an impressive U-diagram, the report pondered the question of whether it was appropriate that Defence (through the Government) continue to own and control the vast spectrum of assets required to support military operations, extending from petrol, oil and lubricants, through to ammunition and clothing, and onto more sophisticated IT and systems integration skills.

As they say, the rest is now history. Roger's efforts were later taken up as official Government policy which saw the transfer of the Office of Defence Production out of the substantive Department, and its initial commercialisation in the form of ADI Limited under Ken Harris' guiding hand. Ken then prepared the company for its eventual privatisation – a process which has just been concluded with the assumption of 100% ownership by Thales.

By the mid-1990s, however, it had also become clear to me that our publishing activities needed to expand outside of the strictures inherited from the printed DIAR newsletter. Technology was changing rapidly thanks to personal computers, and the rise of the Internet. I ultimately concluded that such new technology would mean future readers would be able to download press releases and other defence information at their will electronically, meaning there would be less of a need for publications that did not add any unique value of their own.

So on 1 January 1997, we decided to strip the substantive press release content out of the then printed DIAR newsletter, to create and launch the weekly DIAR.com e-Newsletter, a product with which many of you are now familiar. Following that, we started with a clean sheet of paper and a print designer, and went on to launch in November 1997 Australian Defence Business Review magazine - with a vision to deliver to readers 'high value-added analysis and commentary'.

[[[{Check Jim McDowell is present} - Just as an aside, and I'm not sure whether I have ever relayed this story to Jim McDowell, but distributing the DIAR.com e-Newsletter in bulk over the Internet required us to overcome a number of technical challenges. As many will remember, Windows 95 was a huge product innovation, however, it contained a number of technical glitches when first interfacing with the Internet.

Fortunately, it was on a visit to the UK's Farnborough Air Show in July 1998 that I met a bright young BAE Systems technician, who over a beer at the company's stand, was only too ready to tell me of all the mistakes we had made in setting up the initial DIAR e-Newsletter system, and accordingly, how we could go about fixing them.

So thanks Jim for your company's help in establishing a reliable weekly e-Newsletter platform, and for its continuing support for www.diar.com - which continues to this day via corporate subscription. Of course, there are many others who assist our continuing quest with DIAR.com, and I would particularly like to note Ron Fisher from Raytheon

Australia, Bill Trestrail from Silicon Graphics/SGI, Paul Salteri from Tenix Defence and Peter Hewitson from Jacobs Australia.]]]

So after 17 years of continuous defence publishing focused on the ‘business of doing defence business’, there are one or two areas of particular merit I thought would be useful to highlight here tonight in light of Ross Babbage’s initial approach to assess ADBR’s interest in sponsoring the ‘Security Challenges’ essay competition.

In short, these principles are what were first embraced to guide our own daily efforts at ADBR magazine nearly ten years ago, and include:

- A sense of history, and some real understanding of what has gone on before in national security policy;
- An intimate comprehension of current Defence issues, along with the burgeoning need to secure the ‘Home Front’ from other threats; and
- A view to the future, and what might ultimately be possible.

Teamed with an inquiring mind that is sufficiently disciplined to corral the influence of material generated by paid advertorial, the above three criteria – in my view – satisfy the critical test as hallmarks for those seeking a career in adding value to the daily debate over Australian national security issues.

This also explains our ready enthusiasm to support the Kokoda Foundation’s initiative to encourage up and coming National Security writers through a five-year ADBR funding commitment, so as to ensure that this initiative becomes a regular annual highlight on Canberra’s defence events calendar.

Having said that, and aware that we are still to make the ADBR ‘Security Challenges’ essay competition prize awards, I will express my own personal thanks for your attendance at this seminar-dinner, and will turn the podium back over to Ross and the Minister.