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Submission: Having spent over 18 years in Defence and having served in a number of operational theatres, I believe there is one pervasive theme that should become a focus of the White Paper's view of how to best Defend Australia and it's interests. People. While it is a delicate balancing act between the fundamental inputs to capability, I believe a growing focus of Defence long-term planning should be how to recruit and retain the people that do the job. Regardless of how many JSFs or AWDs or Abrams we buy, if we don't have the people to employ them then the capability is not there. Much is said of strategic threat, core tasks and technological edge, but what do they matter if we don't have the required people in the ADO?

Across many areas of Defence, personnel, in terms of both numbers and skills, are at critically low levels. Any fat that the ADO has been getting by on for a number of decades has evaporated. Some areas have already reached breaking point. Whether the numbers bear the perception out or not, many in Defence feel there has been a gradual decline in the number of people available to do the increasing amount of work required. Particularly in operational need areas where the requirement to get the job done can override a number of the personnel management norms that apply to non-operational arenas. And Defence "efficiency" measures are adding to the burden by making critical people do the work of increasingly redundant professions eg, reduction in administrative support. This overstretching is leading to lowered morale, worsening retention and greater costs to Defence in terms of health impacts and money spent on new initiatives to stop the rot.

A rightful assumption when it comes to Defence planning is that you can't always see what threat is coming. So you need to be prepared. But in regards to being able to staff the ADF/ADO the threat is already visible, it is real, and it is here now. We seem to have been caught short in predicting this threat and/or have been unable to properly address it. I don't think it is possible to overstate the risk of the impacts we face on this front. There is a "critical mass" at which point the system will start to crumble and I think the ADF is getting dangerously close to it. Either drastic steps must be taken to retain and recruit people or the operational tempo of the ADF must be reduced, even temporarily. Much has been said over the last 10 years of how the increased op tempo will become the sustained op tempo and we'd better get used to it. While nice in theory, and appealing to the ADF's can do attitude, there is only so much water that can be squeezed out of a rapidly drying sponge.

There are already some initiatives that are starting to identify the problems, such as the RAAF Aircrew Sustainability Project. But other measures have been poorly targeted. While throwing money at the problem isn't necessarily the answer, if money is going to be thrown, it needs to be substantial to make an impact. If money is deemed to be a way to stop the rot, it should be structured such that it primarily attracts people to the job rather than simply retaining what we have. Retention is important but the people we already have will eventually leave and if we can't recruit then Australia's longer term security will be at extreme risk. In an increasingly materialistic society throwing money at recruiting/retention may be the only viable option.

Sustaining our personnel capability must be the primary focus of Defence over the next 10 years regardless of what the strategic or domestic task is deemed to be. Without people, the JSFs will sit in their hangars, there won't be any ships at sea to respond to humanitarian efforts and there won't be any troops to restore order in an international hotspot, let alone fight a conventional war should one eventuate.

I agree to my submission being published on the Defence website

I agree to my submission being quoted in the Community Consultation Report