



The Media Discourse on Defence: with particular focus on the Reserves

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Introduction

As early as 1923, it was suggested that journalism held the key to popular support for service personnel in war and in peace.¹ Today, this is still true, with often a torrent of information—almost akin to what has been called the ‘super-saturation’ of information, images and issues—about defence forces in the modern media.² Like all government-funded bodies, Australia’s Defence organisation is rightly open to scrutiny. But it is also a favourite with news reporters for the drama and issues that often surround it, evidence of which can be found on-line, on television, on radio and often in newspapers, where evocative headlines alert readers to the latest issue, problem or scandal.

A 2006 study of perceptions of news credibility about the war in Iraq found that stories on-line and on internet blog sites were more believable to consumers than other sources, who saw them as less ‘government aligned’.³ Blog sites often reflect a similar anti-Government, anti-Defence line, not infrequently undermining Defence and its personnel. However, this not new; only the manner of presentation has changed. Particularly from the days of the Vietnam War, the presentation of news on our allies and our serving men and women has often evidenced negative reporting, with a resultant impact on the public’s perception.

It will be argued in this article that contemporary opinion pieces, particularly in the form of blogs and on-line stories, are beginning to show a similar trend. If it continues, this vein of reporting may lead again to Australia’s serving personnel, including the Reserves, having to deal with negative public responses. This is an issue that needs to be countered, including by the development of an appropriate strategic communications strategy.

The Afghanistan experience

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the media headlines covering the war in Afghanistan focus on ADF or coalition casualties. However, there is often an underlying view within editorial pieces which questions the mission, or simply asks the reader or viewer ‘Why are we still in this war?’. In a 2009 article about the situation in Afghanistan, Justin Kelly asserted that (at least in some commentary):

The purpose of the media offensive is to undermine the international consensus supporting continued counter-insurgency and to constrain the abilities of the counter insurgent to apply force.⁴

Kelly contends that the steady stream of headlines outlining casualties, or difficulties in working with Afghanistan’s Government, lead to a lack of political will to stay focused. He also suggests that Western liberal democracies are too risk averse and are seen by their opponents as ‘effete’ and lacking a strategic long-term perspective. Such a strong negative media legacy is bound to result in lack of popular support and negative public opinion, and may lead to difficult challenges for Defence personnel on their return to Australia. Negative ‘lexis’ (word choices) in the Australian media are often relayed to personnel while still serving overseas, and can add further disquiet.

A more recent example, from June 2011, is where *The Advertiser* in South Australia called for a poll on the question ‘Should Australian troops be withdrawn from Afghanistan?’.⁵ The results were 83 per cent against the war, with only 17 per cent believing it was worth staying on to ‘complete the mission’, a phrase heard repeatedly from senior political leaders. While clearly these poll results are non-scientific—and only encourage a response from those who have a stated position—the implication becomes clear when the media uses the poll results in a follow-on story, asserting that ‘support for the war is declining rapidly’ and that there are ‘calls to bring our diggers home’.⁶

A cartoon from about the same time shows a line of ghostly figures in uniform welcoming into the hallowed halls of memory the latest contingent of young men who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for their nation.⁷ The cartoon highlights the deep respect paid to those who have been killed on active service. But it also suggests the public is less forgiving when they act like the rest of us. The obvious question is why are we so respectful of these men and women only when they have died? Why is the media so focused on what is wrong with our Defence forces and its activities, when mostly the individuals involved are just like anyone else but in uniform?

Defence scandals and incompetence

In recent years, there have been a number of sensational media stories related to Defence, most notably focusing on the behaviour of cadets at the Australian Defence Force Academy. Many of the headlines provide no nuances of the Defence environment but focus directly on the deficits that are supposedly apparent in modern armed services. While it is true that headlines are used to create tension and set direction for a reader (and therefore cannot be expected to delineate specific nuances), the catch-all term 'Defence' still implies an effect in all areas and often does not identify a specific focus.

In addition, there are also regular assertions that women in the military are somehow more at risk within Defence than elsewhere. Despite the fact that a number of women are regularly subject to violence in the home or in their communities, those in uniform often seem to get front-page treatment.

This pattern of pejorative headlines, designed to shock, has been identified as the 'discourse of disapproval', which eventually leads to the 'discourse of direction', in which organisations are influenced by media-driven discourses.⁸ While the study in question originally focused on the justice system in modern democracies, it is evident that other government-funded instrumentalities are subjected to a similar pattern, wherein the organisation in question attempts to 'work with the media' as it becomes more and more colonised by the debate. Moreover, 'when a specific position is consistently highlighted throughout media headlines [and reports], it establishes a theme or recurrent motif'.⁹

Recent Defence-related headlines can be viewed as clear examples of the 'discourse of disapproval' and can create negative images in the minds of media consumers of the perceived shortcomings of the organisation and its personnel. This consistent attention arguably also then extends to anything related to Defence. Indeed, apart from Anzac Day and its traditions, Defence often seems under a particularly harsh media spotlight, with a brief selection of headlines from 2011 showing clear evidence of a media focus on pejorative selection (see Table 1).

Table 1. Selection of recent media headlines relating to Defence

Date	Headline	Comment
ABC Radio 891 Talkback, 12 April 2011	Many complaints [13] about the way Defence handles women. Invitation to callers to call in with comments.	No invitation to ask about positive Defence experiences; only negative calls solicited.
Channel Nine evening news, 12 April 2011	'Defence scandal deepens'	'Scandal' as descriptor could be commuted by suggesting 'Defence instigates investigation into ...'
www.smh.com.au 7 April 2011. Also in the <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> of the same date	'Defence attacked in Battle of Sexism'	Minister Stephen Smith reported as having 'lambasted the Defence Force over the decision to force a female cadet ... to face a disciplinary tribunal'.
<i>The Advertiser</i> , 13 April 2011	'Give Women a Fair Go'	Insinuating women are treated unfairly.

Adelaidenow.com.au 12 April 2011	'Can the ADF afford Social Engineering where women turn men from warriors into escorts, from mates to rivals?'	Columnist Andrew Bolt defends but also criticises Defence.
<i>The Australian</i> , 12 April 2011	'A History of Scandal'	An itemised checklist of recent Defence scandals, including HMAS <i>Success</i> and entertainers in the Middle East area of operations.
<i>The Advertiser</i> , 12 April 2011 and other News Limited outlets on-line	'Best to steer clear of "out of control" Defence boys'	Augmented by an on-line poll asking people if they had a bad Defence experience.
<i>The Advertiser</i> and News Limited outlets, including heraldsun.com.au 12 April 2011	'Like running with a pack of wolves'	Comments from public welcomed by polling and on-line blogs.
<i>The Australian</i> , 12 April 2011	'Hopes for cultural change from behaviour stock take'	Poll later in day asking 'should military change its culture? Have your say on Adelaidenow.com.au'
<i>The Australian</i> , 12 April 2011	Editorial: 'Coming to the Defence of women in the forces'	Arguing for care and sensitivity of alleged victims of sex abuse.
<i>The Australian</i> , 12 April 2011	'Alleged rapists now top officers'	Asserting that offenders are now high-ranking military men in crucial jobs in Defence, who have been named in sworn statements.
<i>The Australian</i> , 13 April 2011	'Women harassed at every level'	Also in <Adelaidenow.com.au>
<i>The Advertiser</i> , 14 April 2011 and other News Limited outlets	'Drunken attack on daughter: another military scandal emerges;	Augmented by a photo of a former sergeant who says he was 'driven out of the Army'.
NewsLtd.com.au, 6 May 2011	'Defence to lose 1000 jobs'	Story contends that 'sacred cow of Defence is now not safe'.
ABC News, 19 July 2011	Report that former Army Chief questions strategy in Afghanistan	Suggests the bravery and work of our professional soldiers has been traded for other areas of interest and that a new approach related to national security and nation building needed.
<i>The Australian</i> , 19 July 2011	Article by former Chief of Army titled 'Rethink Diggers Role'	Similar view as above.
<i>The Australian</i> , 19 July 2011	'A Make Do Culture has let Navy Down'	Contends potential collapse of Naval capability and culture.
The Advertiser and <www.newsLtd.com.au >	Poll results from the question 'Are our Troops making progress in Afghanistan?'	62% No, 37% Yes
<i>The Advertiser</i> , 20 August 2011	'Reserves go into Battle'	Report on speech by Hon David Feeney, Parliamentary Secretary for Defence, mentioning use of the word 'choco' as a pejorative term, and Reservists being disparaged by some full-time colleagues.

Unfortunately, this selection of headlines characterises what have been called 'semantic macro-structures', which lead media consumers into how they think about Defence—and only a small percentage of it tends to be positive.¹⁰ In fact, it has been suggested that these types of headlines clearly show an 'abuse of text or talk to establish, confirm or legitimate their use of power' in thinking about the

stories presented.¹¹ The rise (and rise) of journalists as very influential in directing and suggesting a particular reaction is well documented as ‘agenda setting’—and is clearly underway in its not infrequent suggestion that Defence as an organisation needs to be curtailed and/or is clearly in need of direction.¹²

An associated analysis was also undertaken, across 110 separate articles in the period 2010-11, of the collocation of words immediately adjacent to the term ‘Defence’, to see if the collocation potentially created a mindset in perception.¹³ If the initial chart of the results, at Figure 1, is any indication, it clearly points to a negative connotation about Defence and its personnel.

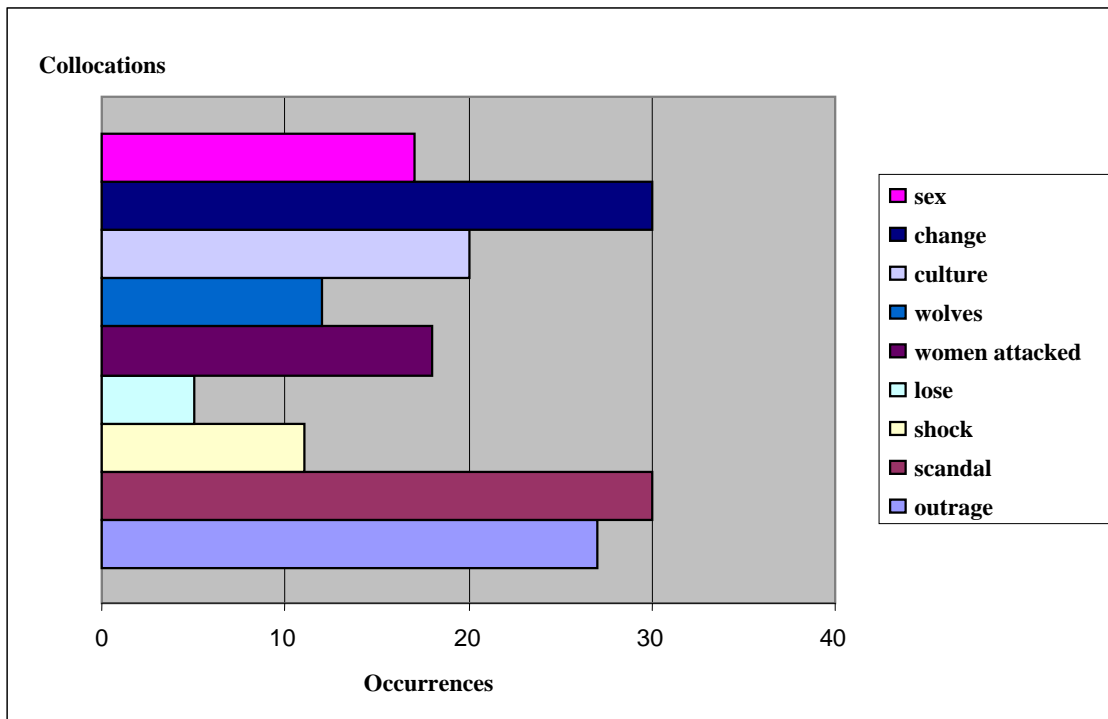


Figure 1. Collocation in media headlines around the word ‘Defence’ in 2010-11

Even a cursory glance at this chart indicates that whenever the term ‘Defence’ is used within a media story, the nearest adjacent term is frequently a pejorative, thereby creating a sense of negativity to point the reader or viewer into an angry reaction. This sets an agenda for lack of support from both the media and public at large. For example, the terms ‘shock’, ‘outrage’ and ‘culture’ frequently co-exist with terms such as ‘inability’ or ‘collapse’, leading to a perception that Defence, its personnel and anyone connected with it, have failings significant enough to garner attention on newspaper headlines or television bulletins on a regular basis.

Such discourses have been found to be unrelenting over time, unless organisations recognise that quick action needs to be taken to prevent reputation and cultural damage. A further question to ask is if the Defence Department and its personnel are constantly under ‘attack’ (except on Anzac Day or memorial days, or when a soldier has fallen in battle) how does this affect other members of Defence who are mentioned differently or not at all?

The focus on ‘Reserves’

Defence Reserves and Reservists are obviously reported on or discussed less frequently than ‘Defence’ itself. Often, people are confused about or do not understand these terms. And they do not figure as strongly in general commentary, despite Reserves being active around the nation and with a considerable number of Reservists deployed at any one time on a full-time basis both in Australia and overseas.

Nevertheless, the analysis of information gleaned for this article clearly shows an emerging problem for the Reserves and Defence more broadly.

For example, a speech given by Senator the Hon David Feeney, Parliamentary Secretary for Defence, at a conference in Adelaide was reported in *The Advertiser* on 20 August 2011.¹⁴ His speech overall was extremely positive and focused on team work as a unifying quality, reporting moves underway to fully integrate the Reserves into the ADF. However, in passing, he mentioned the derogatory term for Reserves as 'chocos' (a World War 2 term of derision, suggesting militia soldiers would 'melt' away under combat pressure) and that some Reserves had been 'disparaged by their comrades', which required a change of culture. Unfortunately, media reporting of Senator Feeney's speech was negative in its focus, despite the speech itself being extremely positive and not emphasising the elements that the media highlighted.

The reality is that Reservists have had a higher public profile, as the tempo of operational commitments around the region has increased, as highlighted by Senator Feeney in his speech.¹⁵ For example, Reservists have served or are serving in Afghanistan, East Timor and the Solomon Islands, working with and alongside their regular counterparts, as an integral part of the Defence Force's contribution in both conflict zones and humanitarian relief and peace-keeping operations. Reserve surgeons, nurses, doctors, commandos, engineers, sappers, infantry soldiers, drivers, logisticians and military police all form part of a cohort needed now more than ever.

The 2009 Defence White Paper asserted that Reservists and Reserve Forces are crucial to the nation, not least in peace-keeping and humanitarian and disaster relief operations in the region, noting that:

In some circumstances, Defence may be required to surge its capabilities to rapidly increase force levels, enhance preparedness or broaden our military response options. The balance and structure of the ADF's full-time and part-time forces can be a force multiplier in such circumstances.¹⁶

The White Paper goes on to expand on this view by suggesting a number of ways to enhance the integration of the part-time force with the regular force and the strategic importance of this move. However, one of the first moves in this direction should be the use of inclusive language related directly to Reservists and the Reserves.

An example of where language and terminology can inadvertently be open to an unfavourable interpretation was a press release from the office of the Minister for Defence in February 2011 in which, while no doubt intending to praise the work of the Reserves, the release noted that 'it is not uncommon to find Reservists out on the street *just* [my italics] helping out in their local community. That occurs on a regular basis whether or not Reservists are formally called up'.¹⁷ While clearly not intended, it could be construed—by linking the modal term *just* with the term 'Reservists'—that Reservists are *just* an auxiliary to the community and not a vital part of the ADF.

A similar example is where politicians or senior officials, in public speeches, at times appear to avoid the word-choice 'Reservists' in the same sentence as the term 'Defence Force personnel'. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, these examples are what is termed in communications theory as a 'weak signal'.¹⁸ These weak signals are usually totally unintentional. However, if left unchecked, they can develop to a point where they become an issue. The need to detect 'weak signals' has been noted in a number of communications research studies, both in assisting to communicate more effectively and in finding issues of concern before they become widespread and a danger to the organisation in question.¹⁹

There are also examples in the broader discourse. At a 2010 meeting of the Chairs of the Defence Reserves Support Council forum,²⁰ disappointment was expressed at the apparent omission of the terms 'Reserves' and 'Reservists' in speeches delivered at the opening of the 'Pan Pacific Conference' in Sydney in January 2010, and subsequently by others at this most important Defence convocation. The unintentional outcome is that 'what is missing' often becomes a focus of attention. These missing elements in discourse are well noted in research and thus become a signal for action for discourse analysts.²¹

Discourse analysis gives a clear indication of how often and how an organisation and its key central personnel are reported and constructed via language in the general community or as used by the media

or in public speeches. In research for this article, it was decided to review Defence-related media reports and speeches in the years 2009 to 2011, focusing on three areas, namely:

- Media reports on Defence issues generally (on-line included),
- Media use of the terms Reserves, Reservists or Reserve Forces or similar, and
- Speeches delivered by politicians (which also included, where possible, associated news releases and their use of these terms).²²

The results, analysing more than 60 articles and speeches, showed that the term ‘Reserves’ had a pejorative term attached to it on a number of occasions. A notable exception was an article in South Australia’s *Messenger Newspapers* in 2009, describing a ‘Boss Lift’ exercise, where employers of Reservists were flown into operational areas to see for themselves the work that their employees were doing on deployment.²³ There was a similarly positive series of articles in the Cumberland Group newspapers in Sydney, from two journalists who accompanied a ‘Boss Lift’ group of employers to observe 8th Brigade soldiers on deployment in Malaysia.²⁴

As mentioned earlier, these ‘collocations’ are known as ‘the company that words keep’, which are described by linguistic theorists as indicative of the mindset of authors.²⁵ They are the words which are most closely sited near the theme or term being analysed or discussed. For example, consider how the term ‘obesity’ is often linked with terms such as epidemic, illness, heart disease or cost to the nation. Similarly, the term ‘road rage’, which was unknown until the late 1980s, is now often linked with terms such as out of control, hoon driving and unsafe streets.

Figure 2 shows the collocations in the articles and speeches under review associated with the terms Reservists, Reserves or Defence Reserves.

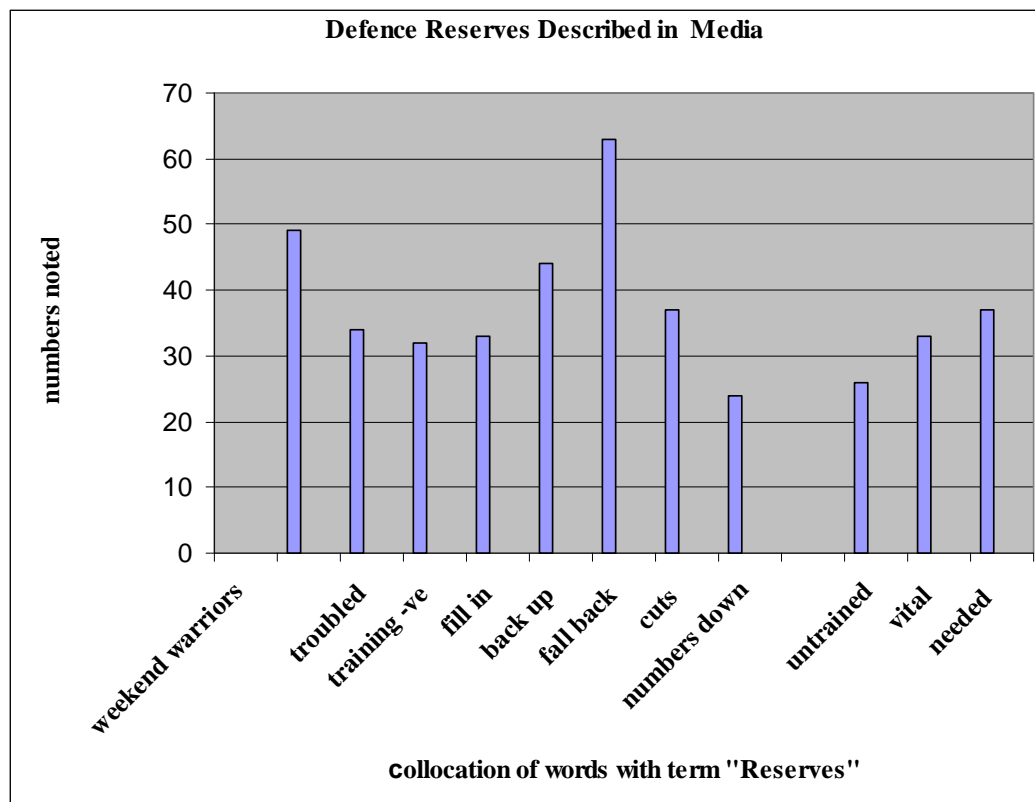


Figure 2. Collocation terms used when reporting on the Defence Reserves

It is clear from this chart that some media articles do describe the contribution of Reserves as 'vital' and 'needed' by the ADF in a number of ways. However, the most frequently-used terms are negative in connotation. For example, the term 'fall back' may be seen as pejorative in the sense that the ADF only falls back on the Reserves if no regular forces are available, or if the ADF does not have enough personnel to fill the gaps. 'Fill in' is another term which suggests a last minute appearance from the interchange bench, to use football terminology, rather than being a 'run on' player in the first instance.

Some of the most positive use of the terms linked or collocated with Reservists was in the coverage of a speech by Major General Greg Melick, then Head of the Cadet Reserves and Employer Support Division, at the International Conference on Employer Support for the Reserves in 2009, which included terms such as 'vital to the nation', 'special forces', 'even more needed than ever' and 'important work carried out by [Reservists] as seen by employers'.²⁶

Another example was in a radio interview by Radio 2CC with then Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie, on 5 January 2010. In reply to claims in a letter to the editor in the *Canberra Times* that 'a reservist is a second class soldier', General Gillespie made clear he did not agree, adding that Reserves were clearly 'very important to the whole of the Australian Defence Organisation'. He also noted that 'Reservists are working with our regular people; they're indistinguishable from each other' and are often fully trained. He went on to say that 'there is no difference when they deliver their output' and, indeed, 'they bear most of the weight or all of the weight at the present time in the Solomons Islands'.

It was evident in this instance that there was favourable media coverage for Reserves and Reservists, albeit in response to a perceived slight. Unfortunately, other examples highlighted the 'missing elements'. In a number of speeches, Reservists were rarely mentioned, except when the presenter had been invited to speak at or was attending a Reserves-related engagement.

Another exception was the media release in early March 2010 by Dr Mike Kelly, Parliamentary Secretary for Defence, outlining the need and the special input from Reserves to the nation and to their employers, in which he extolled the vital work being done by those deployed on overseas missions and support operations.²⁷ He noted that the deployments 'highlight the important role the Reserves play', adding that 'as the ADF's commitments grow, Reserves are bringing increased levels of capability to Australia's Defence Force and this experience can flow directly to the civilian workplace'.²⁸

Similarly, a three-page article by Brad Crouch in South Australia's *Sunday Mail* (and on-line at *NewsLtd.com.au*) on 23 March 2011 usefully showcased the positive element of the work of Reservists and what they do in their civilian work places.²⁹ However, such extended articles are rare, and there is a need for our politicians and civic leaders to be commenting more pro-actively and more positively on the important role of Defence Reserves and their contribution to Defence and ADF operations.

Terminology and branding

In marketing parlance, brand management and communication are essential in ensuring the longevity of a brand and its product or service. For the Reserves, this is especially important, as a culture of 'negation' seems to have become embedded in much of the media and general commentary.

Arguably, one of the underlying problems is the use of the terms Regular Army and Regular Defence personnel, subtly implying that Reservists are somehow 'irregular' and not the same as their full-time counterparts. The first element of connecting a consumer with a product, service or concept is the name of the product. So perhaps the time has come to review the use of the terms Reservist and Reserves, and rebrand and rename them to suit the modern strategic Defence environment.

Yet coming up with new names is not always easy. For example, there was considerable consumer resistance in South Australia when the Government-of-the-day proposed naming a new hospital as 'the Marjorie Jackson Nelson Hospital', after the much admired sports woman, charity campaigner and former Governor of South Australia.³⁰ The community rejected the name. As did consumers for a new product called *Vegemite V 2.0*, which was howled down via news and social media blogs.

While some may argue that the reputation of the Reserves does not warrant the drastic action of rebranding or renaming, it is evident that nomenclatures can come to be seen in a negative light deriving

from media reporting. So perhaps it is now worth considering a future 'new look' Reserve force, as an integral part of a combined force with ready capability for these challenging times.

A further issue is the need for a brand 'mantra' or slogan to be closely identified with a product and to describe what it does. For the Reserves, this mantra is missing. Some would argue that Defence as a brand says it all. However, the importance of the Reserves, as a sub product, is perhaps sufficiently important—not least in terms of reassurance to the community in times of national emergencies or disasters and in helping neighbouring nations—that an updated mantra or slogan needs to be considered and presented to the Australian community for acceptance.

Conclusion

This article has tried to point the way forward in rethinking how Defence is viewed and how the Reserves fit into the picture. Clearly, the fact that the community does not easily distinguish between the various departments, iterations and individuals that comprise 'Defence' is a problem. The unfortunate reality is that 'Defence', mentioned in any format via the media, currently has a tendency to inveigle a legacy of non-confidence and lack of trust that those within are doing the right thing, making the right things and treating their own and others with respect and equality.

Adding to the problem is that there undoubtedly are some in the full-time, 'regular' component of Defence who are 'luke-warm' to the benefits of promoting and highlighting the role and achievements of Reservists. After all, for them a part-time role is not the same as full-time service, where the training and capabilities of the regulars are maintained at a higher level of professionalism. The bottom line is that a modern defence force cannot be sustained, nor operate effectively, without the support of its Reserves.

Moreover, community support for the work of Defence is challenging enough without a media legacy that consistently highlights its failings. To overcome what seems to be a relentless focus on negativity, urgent work is needed to develop a strategic communications strategy that addresses these perceptions. What must be avoided is any return to the post-Vietnam era, when those who had served their country—and those still in uniforms—were treated with such disrespect.

Dr Pamela Schulz is a former journalist, teacher and lecturer, who has had a 20+ year career in communication management and community education as a senior practitioner, adviser and manager within the South Australian Government public service. She has qualifications in Sociology and Communications, and a Masters Degree in Education, as well as a Doctorate in Communications. Pamela has won a number of prestigious awards for her work, including from the Public Relations Institute of Australia and the Australian Marketing Institute. She currently serves as the ministerially-appointed Chair of the Defence Reserves Support Council in South Australia.

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