

## Crispin Hull

Journalism and other writing

# Govt loses its way over navigation



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National security is often cited as the No 1 priority of government. Without that, all else becomes meaningless. It is why we are spending billions on nuclear submarines and other defence hardware.

It is why the Government last week put forward a major initiative on cyber security. These days cyber-attacks can be as damaging as physical attacks and a great deal more difficult to find out their source and how to respond.





A lot depends on that network. Each year about 18,000 vessels use it to navigate the international shipping lane that runs between the Great Barrier Reef and the coast – virtually the totality of Australia’s eastern seaboard trade.


You know, the sort of stuff we are spending billions worth of submarines and ships on to defend.

AMSA lost the staff and skills to do it when it was privatised. There is a good argument that the Howard Government should never have instigated the privatisation in the first place. In most other countries such critical navigation maintenance is done by government, such as the US Coast Guard.

But having privatised the task, it remains a government responsibility to ensure the task is done and to ensure the skill set to do it is not lost to Australia as might happen because AMS Group employees, in the face of AMSA’s action, quite reasonably will seek work  
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 But the Albanese Government seems to not care; not to understand the threat; or be totally  
 beholden to a statutory authority which is behaving in a most inexplicable way.

 It is understandable that government’s do not want to be seen interfering with operational  
... matters of statutory authorities; nor want to be seen influencing the tender and contract processes of statutory authorities. Indeed, this is why we have statutory authorities – to remove political influence, patronage, and favouritism.

But that does not relieve governments and politicians from the overall responsibility for ensuring that critical matters of national security do not go off the rails. When things look awry, it is the Government’s job to find out what is going on.

If things go wrong – at best the loss to Australia of key skills at worse a halt to maritime trade, as happened this month with the cyber-attack on our ports – a government cannot excuse itself by saying it was the fault of the statutory authority

The Opposition seems uninterested, too.

There was a brief mention of the matter in the four-minute hearing of the Senate Rural & Regional Affairs and Transport (RRAT) Legislation Committee on 23 October at which

AMSA fell back on its “we are working on it” stand.

The threat to the navigation aids, and therefore Australia’s trade and tsunami-warning system, comes first through wear and tear and the need for physical upkeep in a difficult maritime environment.

But a further threat arises because many these navigation aids are linked digitally. AMS Group has developed a highly effective cyber-security system for them. That will be lost on 30 June.

It does not sit well with Minister O’Neil’s statement last week that the Government will “better secure critical infrastructure” from cyber-attack.

The Government’s very inaction is doing the reverse: exposing critical Australian infrastructure to cyber-attack.

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So far, the issue has been aired in eight Australian Community Media mastheads and one interview on ABC Far North (Cairns) radio program. The ACM mastheads include those that serve port cities and ABC Far North is always interested in the Great Barrier Reef.

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... incidentally the international shipping lane is as narrow as five nautical miles wide inside the reef. If the navigation aids are not properly maintained, the potential for a ship hitting the reef is obvious, as Captain Cook found out – but he didn’t have thousands of tonnes of oil aboard.

I have asked the offices of the Ministers for Defence, Cyber Security, and Infrastructure about the issue and been met with silence. But it won’t be any good saying sorry after the event.

It seems in Australia that, unless News Ltd finds some anti-Green; anti feminism; anti-leftie agenda in a story, no-one in the Government or the Opposition cares less, however important the issue.

Crispin Hull

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