



PATRONS
Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG
Prof. the Hon. Gareth Evans AC QC
Prof. Fiona Stanley AC

Submission to the 'Inquiry into the Department of Defence Annual Report 2023-24'

Monday 3 February 2025

This is a submission by the Rationalist Society of Australia (RSA) to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's 'Inquiry into the Department of Defence Annual Report 2023-24'. In our submission, we will focus on the Australian Defence Force's failure to meet the wellbeing needs of its service personnel.

Religious wellbeing support for a predominantly non-religious ADF

In the *Annual Report 2023-24*, Chief of the Defence Force Admiral David Johnston AC says the Defence Force is committed to achieving "better outcomes for our people" and to "improving the welfare of serving and former-serving members of the ADF".

Yet, currently many members of the ADF do not have access to suitable frontline wellbeing support. Defence relies almost exclusively on religious chaplains who have theological degrees and experience in church pastoring for its frontline wellbeing support capability. With chaplains embedded alongside personnel in military units and ships, they are considered the "first port of call" for Defence members in need.

While Defence's public relations line states that chaplains serve "all" people – those of religious and non-religious backgrounds – [this is, clearly, a myth](#). For various reasons, many individuals do not feel comfortable in speaking to religious agents about their problems. A number of people said as much in evidence to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide.

In 2020, the Royal Australian Navy recognised the need to provide the option of secular frontline wellbeing support to its personnel and introduced secular roles known as Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officers (MSWO) to its chaplaincy branch. A [review by an independent tribunal](#) has since found "strong demand" for the secular roles – of which there are still just a handful – and considered that they had delivered a "complementary

Rationalist Society of Australia Inc.
ABN 41 853 904 693
PO Box 1312, Hawksburn, Vic. 3142
info@rationalist.com.au



PATRONS
Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG
Prof. the Hon. Gareth Evans AC QC
Prof. Fiona Stanley AC

non-religious alternative” in helping to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of Navy personnel.

The Australian Army and the Royal Australian Air Force have not yet followed Navy’s lead and reformed their respective frontline wellbeing capabilities. As a result, it is possible that thousands of Army and Air Force personnel do not have access to the frontline wellbeing support that they want and need.

In championing secular reform across Defence, Principal Chaplain Collin Acton, the former Director-General of Navy Chaplaincy, [says Army and Air Force leaders “have their heads in the sand”](#) and are “effectively disregarding the evolving needs” of their non-religious personnel. Acton warns that Defence’s almost exclusive reliance on ordained ministers of religion poses an “inexcusable risk” to the health and wellbeing of serving personnel.

We believe that denying secular frontline wellbeing support is, fundamentally, a human rights matter. As such, we intend to raise this case of religious-based discrimination against non-religious Defence personnel in a submission to the upcoming United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (Fourth Cycle) into Australia’s human rights.

We support religious Defence personnel having access to religious-based chaplaincy. But the same opportunity must be extended to non-religious personnel to seek secular, or non-religious, wellbeing support.

Official Defence data reveal the staggering lack of secular/non-religious wellbeing support for non-religious personnel. [The initial 2022 interim review](#) into Navy’s MSWO roles noted that the ratio of Christian chaplains to Christian Defence personnel was 1:134. Meanwhile, the ratio for non-religious pastoral carers to non-religious personnel was 1:11992. For Muslims, the ratio was 1:62. For Buddhists, it was 1:83.

The current situation is particularly egregious given that *a majority* of ADF personnel identify as *not religious*. [Data from the latest Defence Census](#), published late last year, show that, as of 2023, 61 per cent of Defence personnel said they were not religious – up from 56 per cent in 2019. Christian affiliation in Defence is plummeting, down to just 34 per cent from 40 per cent in 2019.



PATRONS
Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG
Prof. the Hon. Gareth Evans AC QC
Prof. Fiona Stanley AC

Many Defence personnel, especially women and people who identify as LGBTIQ, would be concerned about engaging with chaplains who have theological and ideological views at odds with mainstream Australia on all kinds of social issues. The Air Force's own inquiry into inappropriate behaviour in its chaplaincy branch [identified concerns about theology](#) clashing with Defence values. The inquiry report made a number of recommendations to combat the problem of "conflict/dissonance" between the faith of chaplains and Defence values.

In a [submission to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide](#), we detailed evidence of how chaplains could not provide non-judgemental care and how their worldviews were at odds with modern society and out of step with the culture that Defence was trying to develop. We included in our submission chaplains' comments – many from official Defence publications – that showed, for example, negative sentiment towards non-religious people and same-sex relationships.

We are also troubled that the ADF is increasingly relying on [Pentecostal and evangelical chaplains](#) to provide frontline pastoral care and wellbeing support. Such Christians typically hold views that are widely considered to be at the fringes of mainstream society. Defence also has many chaplains endorsed by mainstream churches that hold dogmatic and unpopular views on a number of issues. Mainstream churches have frequently spearheaded opposition to popular social policies – consider, for example, their positions on same-sex marriage, voluntary assisted dying, and access to abortion. The Catholic Church continues to tell governments that voluntary assisted dying – now legal in all Australian states – is really "suicide". It is perfectly understandable, therefore, if Defence members personally dealing with any of these issues themselves or in relation to loved ones will not want to consult with chaplains who originate from such religious institutions.

The role of RACS: using Defence chaplaincy for religious missionary purposes

We are also deeply troubled that chaplains and the taxpayer-funded committee of clerics that oversees the recruitment of chaplains – the Religious Advisory Committee to the Services (RACS) – view the role of chaplains as a "missionary" one. We provided [much evidence of this](#) to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide. Such evidence included:

Rationalist Society of Australia Inc.
ABN 41 853 904 693
PO Box 1312, Hawksburn, Vic. 3142
info@rationalist.com.au



**RATIONALIST
SOCIETY OF
AUSTRALIA**

PATRONS
Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG
Prof. the Hon. Gareth Evans AC QC
Prof. Fiona Stanley AC

- members of RACS saying publicly that chaplains were “missionaries in the Defence Force” and “ambassadors for Christ...participating in the mission of Christ and pointing people to God”, and describing Defence personnel as “sheep” to be brought into the “fold” of the church;
- chaplains speaking about building relations with Defence personnel to “remind them that there’s a God and that they’re never alone”, and describing the chaplaincy role as providing the “peace, hope and calm that only comes from a relationship with Jesus”.

Many Defence personnel would be deeply uncomfortable at the thought that they were the target of missionaries in their own workplace.

Defence, of course, is continually in a process of upgrading its military hardware and software capabilities in an effort to protect Australia’s national security interests. Yet, Defence’s frontline wellbeing support capability – religious-based chaplaincy – has remained frozen in time despite the fundamental demographic changes that have occurred in Australia since the early 20th century. [As Principal Chaplain Acton has said](#), if Defence were today tasked with building a modern frontline wellbeing capability from scratch, it certainly wouldn’t start with religious-based chaplaincy.

We are also deeply troubled by the influence that RACS has on Defence Force decision-making and its role in obstructing secular reform, forcing out reforming elements and entrenching religious chaplaincy in Defence. We also [outlined these concerns in our submission](#) to the Royal Commission into Defence & Veteran Suicide. Given that RACS does not even represent the majority of Defence personnel (with the majority being not religious), it is clearly time for the federal government to reform this body. At a minimum, non-religious Defence personnel deserve to have fair representation on such a committee. They deserve to have people advocating for their interests within the Defence Force. Currently, RACS’ membership is limited to religious ministers and clerics.

We would be happy to assist your inquiry further.

Si Gladman
Executive Director,
Rationalist Society of Australia

Rationalist Society of Australia Inc.
ABN 41 853 904 693
PO Box 1312, Hawksburn, Vic. 3142
info@rationalist.com.au