

House of Representatives, Monday 28 October 1996

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Joint Committee: Report

Mr SINCLAIR (New England) (12.37 p.m.) —On behalf of the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report entitled *Defence Sub-Committee: Visit to Queensland and the Northern Territory 5-8 August 1996*, together with the minutes of proceedings and evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr SINCLAIR —In presenting the report, I would like to make a few observations upon it. It is a report that followed a short tour of inspection—inspections for which on earlier occasions when you were in a happier role you were able to accompany the rest of us, Mr Speaker. It was a visit made to northern facilities—Brisbane, Townsville and Darwin—in August this year. The program placed appropriate emphasis on what all of us accept as the essential briefing of members of parliament through the Defence Subcommittee on learning first-hand about the Australian Defence Force, its members, its priorities and how the defence personnel relate to the events in our strategically important part of the world and, in this instance, in northern Australia.

Although short, the program of visits and meetings provided very useful information for the members of the subcommittee, particularly those who have not previously served in that capacity. I take this opportunity to welcome new members of the parliament to the subcommittee. During the program, we had many opportunities to discuss topical defence issues with commanding officers and service personnel, and we gained valuable insight into modern defence capabilities and requirements in the north.

The report we presented does not pretend to be an exhaustive discussion of all the topics raised with or by the subcommittee during the familiarisation program, but in our conclusions we identified some of the particular aspects that we felt were relevant. I draw the attention of honourable members to those, which are on page 33 of the report in section 5. We were particularly interested in seeing what has been undertaken through the Army Presence in the North concept, which has been developing in the services generally since the opening of the new HMAS Darwin defence base when my predecessor Sir James Killen was Minister for Defence.

As far as APIN is concerned, the new emphasis began with the opening of Robertson Barracks in 1989 and will continue until the final phase of the project in the year 2001. Fully realised, it will mean the relocation of some 2,300 soldiers and 2,600 family members to Darwin. APIN represents a departure from the traditional home location elements of the Australian Defence Force and is predominantly designed to ensure that the members of the Australian Defence Force are climatically adapted and are located where we can best provide a response, if necessary, in the more remote areas of Australia and to any threat that might emerge from outside Australia.

APIN represents a major commitment to increasing Australia's defence capabilities in the north. It is also a major financial investment. It is a clear example of tailoring modern construction to meet the demands of the terrain and the climate of the tropics. The overall cost of the project is around \$500 million, and there are significant flow-on effects for the Northern Territory economy. We learned that at present Defence is directly spending an average of \$2 million per week in the Northern Territory, which with construction would be closer to \$4 million per week, not including construction and maintenance expenditure by the Defence Housing Authority. In eight years of operation in Darwin, the authority has injected \$27.3 million on average each year into the local economy. The relative effect of direct and

indirect Defence expenditure is expected to be maintained at around 10 per cent of the gross territory product from 1995 to 2001.

One of the features of APIN which impressed the subcommittee was the continued partnership with private industry in the design and construction of the facilities and amenities, and the associated tendering processes which are designed to encourage the participation of small as well as large contractors.

The Defence Housing Authority has also participated in successful joint ventures with private sector developers. The committee attended the opening of Fairway Waters, which was opened by my colleague the honourable member for the Northern Territory (Mr Dondas), and the latest collaborative project at Palmerston, south-east of Darwin, which provides high quality housing for defence personnel as well as for private purchases.

As one who at the time was a little critical of the founding of the Defence Housing Authority and a bit concerned about the role it would take, on each of the many projects I have seen I think the Defence Housing Authority has done a remarkable job in improving the quality of accommodation for the men and women of the Australian Defence Force and their families. Publicly, I would like to endorse them in the task they are pursuing.

Another area of major interest to the subcommittee during the northern visits program was the Army 21 review proposed blueprint for the Army of the 21st century. Members of the committee are critical that within the army there has been too little opportunity for dialogue between members of the services in a public way. We do not see that restructuring the army is something that needs to be confidential. It is something that would have benefited if it had been developed in a way which allowed all those interested to contribute to the debate rather than having it held in such close confine that few knew of its content, although there has been much speculation. This has not just been within the services but also within the media, and a lot of it has been about the directions to be proposed for Australia's army of the future.

As a result of the ministerial defence policy statement in parliament on 15 October 1996, there is now an opportunity to know a little of the directions the government intends to take. The subcommittee would hope that it will shortly receive a briefing from officers of the Department of Defence on the content of this policy statement and would hope that, from that, there might be an opportunity not just for a parliamentary debate but also for a more open debate in the community generally about the directions that it should take. As one who has been involved in the services for many years, I think it is important that we look at it not only from the top down. In other words, it should not be a management exercise; we need to look at the role of the individual soldier.

I, for one, have been impressed by the way in which individual soldiers today are better qualified and more skilled. They make a very important contribution individually beyond that of some of their predecessors because of enhanced capacity—the greater firepower of weapons and technological equipment available to them. It is of concern to me that we do not just accept, for example, a nine-man section in an infantry company of days gone by as being the necessary way to operate in the future.

If individual soldiers are going to be more sophisticated in their capacity to deliver firepower, then we should be looking at the numbers within sections. We should not just be looking at the role of the individual soldier but at the role of the army itself. I trust all that will be taken into account within the Army 21 review. Aspects that relate to the performance of the soldier are at least as important as they are in the management of the personnel of the forces.

The other aspect I wanted to comment on briefly is the army reserves. I am concerned at the capacity of most individuals in today's work force to provide the 50-day training that is to be expected of members of the general reserve. That is a big ask. It is going to make it extraordinarily difficult for many of those in the wider community who would like to contribute to the army reserves and participate. It worries me that it is going to be hard, but

not because of the security of their employment. It is not a matter of giving them a guarantee of being able to get their jobs; it is a matter of their ability in relation to the work demands of the work force. Problems need to be addressed in that category.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the Minister for Defence (Mr McLachlan), and the military and civilian personnel of the Australian Defence Force, who assisted in ensuring the success of the subcommittee's familiarisation program, the first of this parliament. I would also like to thank the secretariat of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. I thank Joanne Towner, the secretary; Chris Lawson, who accompanied us on this mission; and Jane Vincent, who is on the Defence Subcommittee. Each of them worked closely with defence personnel to develop a program of visits, briefings and inspections. These provide much valuable information about defence requirements and capabilities in northern Australia to subcommittee members and, through us, hopefully to the parliament. I commend the report to the parliament.

Mr PRICE (Chifley) (12.47 p.m.) —I would like to endorse the remarks and contribution of the Chairman of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, the right honourable member for New England (Mr Sinclair). I certainly did not disagree with anything he said. It is a feature of the operation of the Defence Subcommittee that members really do try to bring an honest view and adopt a bipartisan approach to the issues presented to them. I compliment all who have been involved in the tradition in the past and those presently serving for continuing it now.

There are a few things I did want to comment on about this visit. I apologise if I go over some of the ground of the right honourable member for New England. It was really great that we were able to visit the 5th Aviation Regiment, which had been involved in the tragedy at Townsville. I compliment Colonel Tony Fraser, the commanding officer, and all members of the unit. We had a briefing. I was impressed with the honesty and sincerity of the briefing and the way all issues were openly presented without any questioning or probing. I can only commend them for the spirit and approach they are adopting following such a tragedy, which seared the nation as a whole. Not only us but all of Australia wish them well in rebuilding. We were able to visit the 1st Division, which includes 6 RAR, the Ready Reserve component. I do not want to make any cheap points about the government. The government has made a decision to disband the Ready Reserve. When we went around, we were very impressed with the standard of the ready reservists and their commitment and motivation. I thought it was interesting that the officers were really impressed with the type of individual they are getting into the Ready Reserve.

What makes this perhaps more relevant today is that we are having calls for introducing national service. Following the remarks of the right honourable member for New England, I think the army is requiring a better educated, more adaptable, more flexible soldier—with no disrespect—rather than the cannon fodder that we have traditionally been used to in years gone by.

As you go around the community, you often hear the call, 'Let's reintroduce national service.' On this visit, as with every other visit I have had the opportunity to have with the Defence Subcommittee, I have never once had an officer or a member of the services come up to me and say, 'We need to reinstitute national service.'

I want to make a public request of the chairmen of our committee and subcommittee: in view of the popularity of this call, perhaps it would be worth while if we did have a short inquiry to look at whether national service is appropriate and whether the army's grave reservations about national service are well founded. The subcommittee could perform a useful task in putting that to bed.

Last but not least, I wanted to talk about Army 21, as this was raised previously. I congratulate the army for such a thoroughgoing review. I do not want to comment on the

ministerial statement, but I do want to say thank you to the Minister for Defence (Mr McLachlan), as I understand he is undertaking to provide us with a copy of the important information available. I agree with the chairman of the committee that it is healthy for us to try to understand the concepts underpinning Army 21 and then have a debate about our respective views on the direction of the army. That ought to be mirrored into the community. Again, I would like to say how much I appreciate—as I know other subcommittee members do—the opportunity to see serving men and women on their own territory, to speak frankly with them to gauge their concerns on the ground, and then come back to the parliament and report, as we are doing today.

Mr TAYLOR (Groom) (12.52 p.m.) —I stand very briefly today to be involved in the tabling of the report entitled *Defence Sub-Committee: Visit to Queensland and the Northern Territory, 5-8 August 1996*. It is an excellent report and it indicates the extent to which this parliament, particularly its committees, are involved in the area of defence, foreign affairs and trade. I want to particularly thank the honourable member for Chifley (Mr Price) for his comments about bipartisanship. It is very important, in this committee in particular, that we do exercise a very large degree of bipartisanship. As somebody who has been involved in this committee—this is my third parliament—I think that a very large measure of bipartisanship does exist and that the parliamentary processes and, hopefully, the Australian Defence Force is the better for that input.

I want to reiterate what both the right honourable member for New England (Mr Sinclair) and the member for Chifley have said about 5 Aviation Regiment and, in particular, the commanding officer, Colonel Tony Fraser. None of us could have been anything but impressed by the professionalism and the leadership that that officer exhibited when we were briefed so soon after the Black Hawk tragedy, which is still bouncing around the media and will continue to for some time.

The report itself does raise a number of broader issues in terms of the Ready Reserve. Decisions have been made by our government, and I strongly support the measure that we have taken. But it does have an implication for Army 21 and, as outlined in the ministerial statement delivered a couple of weeks ago, a lot of ground has to be covered in explaining what Army 21 involves. At the local level, I have yet to find out to what extent 49 RQR and 25 RQR are involved in the augmented or revised 6 Brigade with respect to that concept. I think Army 21 has a few potential pitfalls, but until such time as we are briefed in some detail it is very difficult to make a specific comment.

In relation to APIN, the Army Presence in the North, as somebody who was involved—as you have been, Mr Speaker—in the Public Works Committee, I can say that a very large amount of capital expenditure has been outlaid in establishing what is a great strategic asset in the Darwin area. I am sure the honourable member for the Northern Territory (Mr Dondas) will have something to say about APIN when he gets on his feet in a moment. Robertson barracks is a facility that is both functional and cosmetically pleasing. It is a facility which all members of the army, in particular, will be pleased with.

Implicit in some of the comments contained in this report is the professionalism of the Australian Defence Force. Yes, the ADF has shortages. Yes, at times they are not able to meet their commitments. However, I am sure the right honourable member for New England and the member for Chifley would join with me in yet again congratulating the Australian Defence Force, including its senior hierarchy, in particular, General Baker who, as the Chief of the Defence Force over recent years, has shown a large measure of leadership under very difficult and trying conditions, particularly when it comes to the budget. It gives me pleasure to be involved—albeit briefly—in the tabling of this report, and I commend it to the House.

Mr DONDAS (Northern Territory) (12.57 p.m.) —I rise to support the report entitled *Defence Sub-Committee: Visit to Queensland and the Northern Territory, 5-8 August 1996*

tabled by the right honourable member for New England (Mr Sinclair). It represents a very important development in defence for the Northern Territory. At the outset, Mr Speaker, I must advise you and other members of the House that I was unable to complete the whole tour with members of the Defence Subcommittee. I was able to do only the Northern Territory leg of the tour. Unfortunately, due to other commitments, I missed out on what were probably very interesting parts of the tour.

The visit to the Northern Territory was very important in view of the fact that there has been a tremendous build-up by government over the past few years about defence facilities in the Northern Territory. The right honourable member for New England did say that the financial benefits to the Northern Territory are somewhat outstanding. In this 1996-97 budget an additional \$2 million will be spent on infrastructure facilities in the Northern Territory, on top of nearly \$4 million that is currently being spent. It is estimated that the defence budget for the Northern Territory is in excess of \$200 million.

We are aware of other impending programs for the Northern Territory. I understand from the Chairman of the Public Works Committee, the honourable member for Wakefield (Mr Andrew), that the Public Works Committee has just visited Darwin and was able to evaluate some proposals that are being put to it by the department. I am aware of the upgrade of RAAF base Darwin, involving an expenditure in excess of \$60 million, which will make that facility much more efficient, as there will be more space available, with infrastructure that will be able to get aircraft in and out much more quickly. There is also an upgrade at the Larrackeyah barracks on behalf of the navy at HMAS Coonawarra where, if the Public Works Committee recommends that the money be spent, \$20 million will be expended to increase the facility. I thought it was very important that our members were able to see and hear first-hand from the officers in Darwin who were involved in providing the briefings.

I would like to speak about Norforce in this regard. Norforce is a small military facility. Members were given a very good briefing by the commander of Norforce. We also had a briefing from APIN, the Army Presence in the North project. That gave members a comprehensive feeling for where we are going. We also had briefings from the headquarters of Northern Command, which is called Norcom.

The other exciting project which will need to be evaluated in the near future is the army's decision to take over a property in a remote part of the Northern Territory, between Timber Creek and Kununurra, called Bradshaw Station. Bradshaw Station is being evaluated to see whether it will become a facility for tropical warfare training for the Australian Army. I am also led to believe that other countries which are interested in tropical warfare training will be invited to participate at that new training facility once it has been approved.

I was very fortunate to have my colleagues from the Defence Subcommittee with me when I opened a joint facility at Palmerston, in Darwin, called Fairway Waters. I had invited my colleagues to attend the official opening of the joint housing venture between the Defence Housing Authority and the Delfin Property Group. Members were able to see first-hand the type of accommodation that is now being built and supplied for our army people in the territory.

I think it is very important to understand that people in the defence system need to have good housing if they are going to stay, especially in what one considers to be a remote area. I do not see Darwin as being a remote area, but somebody coming from Sydney or Melbourne may perceive it to be remote. The important thing is that the accommodation now being provided under this new joint venture is something that we as a government, the army as an organisation and Delfin as the joint venture partner can be very proud of. (Time expired)

Mr BRADFORD (McPherson) (1.02 p.m.) —I would like to make a small contribution to the tabling of this report by the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Although I am in my third term in the parliament, it is

the first time that my colleagues have given me the privilege of serving on this committee. I am delighted to be a member of the Defence Subcommittee as part of the overall committee. It is obviously a very good committee. I have enjoyed so far the way in which the committee is run. The committee secretariat is obviously very professional. So I am looking forward to my service on the committee.

The four days or so that the Defence Subcommittee spent on its visit to Queensland and the Northern Territory was extremely valuable from my point of view. Although I am one member of the committee who has actually served in the army—and, indeed, one of two members in the place who have returned from active service—the army has changed a lot since I was in it in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, as you get back into it, visit some of the bases and talk to some of the personnel, you see that some things have not changed a great deal. Certainly, this was a very important part of my re-education and reintroduction to the operation of the services. I enjoyed the four days very much and found them particularly helpful.

I thank the Minister for Defence (Mr McLachlan) for allowing us the use of the 34 Squadron aircraft. It was a very comfortable way to travel, but perhaps we should not dwell too much on that side of it. It also made the four days very productive because it allowed us to do in four days what we could not possibly have done otherwise. So that was very worth while and useful.

I understand that the committee is to visit other defence establishments. Our particular objective on these four days was to visit the establishments in Queensland and the Northern Territory. Of course, there are many other military establishments in Australia and I am looking forward to having the opportunity to visit those.

Could I also say how impressed I was by the reception we received from defence personnel, from senior officers down, in all of the three services. Each of them was well prepared for our visit, from Major-General Ford down. In every place we went they were very well prepared for our visit, very cooperative and very pleased that we as members of the committee and members of parliament were actually on the ground to talk to them and to talk to soldiers and other ranks about what was going on in the areas in which they were involved. I mention that because it was very pleasing to be received and to have been so comprehensively briefed at every stop.

The member for Chifley (Mr Price) and others have alluded to the Ready Reserve scheme. The government, in its policy for some time prior to the election, was committed to disbanding the Ready Reserve scheme. I believe that was the right decision, although I ought to say how impressed I was when I talked to ready reservists. They were very committed to the scheme. They had obviously benefited greatly from it. No doubt many people were disappointed by that decision. But I think the point emphasised by the minister in the speech he made the other day which was called 'Restructuring the Australian Army and defence efficiency review' was that this would allow us to do what has been long overdue—that is, to put some real resources into the reserve. For a long time the reserve has been very much a second rate organisation. It has been underequipped. The decision to do away with the Ready Reserve will free up funds to enable the reserve to be brought up to strength and to increase the contribution that can be made by reservist soldiers.

I know from my own experience that there is nothing more frustrating than to be in the reserve, committed to it—and most of those who join the reserve are very committed to it—but to find the training is not available to the extent that it should be and that the equipment is not up to scratch. I think that will be a very worthwhile outcome of the decision to disband the Ready Reserve.

I say to the member for the Northern Territory (Mr Dondas) how much I enjoyed the Northern Territory part of the visit. Darwin is a bit remote for most of us. The APIN project, the Army

Presence in the North project, is going very well. Robertson barracks were excellent. That was one eye-opener for me, not having been around the army very much for many years—to see the change in the conditions that exist for soldiers these days. Their living conditions and the facilities that are available to them are excellent. Robertson barracks is a very fine asset for the defence services. (Time expired)

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl) — Order! The time allotted for statements on this report has expired. Does the member for New England wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

Mr SINCLAIR (New England) —I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later. I trust that this may be debated on some future occasion.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER — In accordance with standing order 102B, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.