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The future of the Royal United Services Institute



an address to the 121st Anniversary Dinner¹ of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales at the Royal Automobile Club of Australia, Sydney, on 21 August 2009 by

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Chris Ritchie, the National President, presents a strategic review of the Royal United Services Institute in Australia, concluding with his vision for its development over the next five years.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for inviting me to join you tonight. It is a pleasure and an honour to be here. One-hundred and twenty-one years is indeed something to celebrate, pre-dating as it does almost any other Defence-related organisation in the country. Whilst your founder, Major-General J. S. Richardson, would be bemused to see an air vice-marshal in his chair, I am sure that he would be proud of the fact that his creation lives on and is doing so well – my congratulations to you all!

Tonight, as I approach the end of my first year as National President, I shall talk about the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in Australia, its place in the community, its relationship with Defence and where I hope to take it.

Strategic Review of the Royal United Services Institute

Before I became President, I undertook a desktop review of how the RUSI was travelling. I did it to test a feeling that there was a steady decline in the affairs of the RUSI that required some urgent action in order to turn things around. A number of longstanding and respected members supported that view. Declining and ageing membership and an apparent disinterest amongst serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel were the most common concerns.

I found that I and those who had advised me were both right and wrong – right in that the RUSI was suffering from a lack of confidence brought on by declining membership in the midst of growing public commentary on defence and security issues; and wrong in that we did not need to recreate the RUSI – rather, we needed to ensure that it keeps pace with modern trends in communication in order to retain its relevance and membership.

Perhaps the most significant outcome was that the RUSI aim – to promote informed debate on, and to improve public awareness and understanding of, Defence and national security – remained highly relevant. The lingering doubts and issues were about the form that the RUSI might take to achieve this aim. Should it compete with the think tanks, such as the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and the Kokoda Foundation? Should it become more of a lobby group and revise its public commentary policy to give it an Australian Defence Association-type image? How should it shape its relationship with Defence and with potential sponsors? Should membership be restricted so as to make the RUSI an ADF alumni association? These and many other questions came to mind and were discussed within the national council. Ultimately, the RUSI's unique position with respect to both the community and Defence were decisive in indicating the way ahead.

Today, the Australian national security and defence apparatus is as busy and as visible as it has ever been other than during the two world wars. It has grown and spread its coverage much wider than ever before. Recently, it has spawned a Defence White Paper that is perhaps more ambitious than any of its predecessors. On the other hand, it has also given air time to a lot of uninformed commentary.

What then might the RUSI make of this rich vein events with great relevance to its objectives? On purely financial grounds, the RUSI cannot compete with the funded think tanks, so, as nice as it might be to be in that space, it is not an option for us in the near future. But, whilst money is not one of them, we do have some other distinguishing features which stand us in good stead:

- We are genuinely apolitical and can offer a bipartisan approach.
- The only two organisations in Australia which cover the broad spectrum of security and are open to all are the RUSI and the Australian

¹Attended by 90 members and guests.

Defence Association. The latter does not seem to have the public fora that we have. Where else can anyone by paying a small membership fee or in some instances, no fee at all, have regular access to discussion of security issues and regular access to the key players?

- The RUSI takes no particular point of view. It does not alienate anyone, it informs debate.
- The RUSI is represented in every capital in the land.
- The RUSI has the strong support of the leadership of Defence

The corollary of that last point is that we need to keep Defence on side. Without their support – in facilities, grant-in-aid and in the supply of speakers – we would be in trouble. That seems to preclude a role as a lobby group. But it does not preclude us seeking to become better able to stand on our own feet where it is sensible to do so. I will return to the specifics of our relationship with Defence shortly.

The outcome was that the national council agreed that the broad RUSI model of informed debate without partisanship was a good basis for the future. What needed to be done was to find ways and means of funding the necessary modernisation of the model.

Membership

So, in a sense, it comes back to membership. RUSI membership was about 3200 in 2004-05 and declined to around 2800 in 2006-07. All states have worked hard at reversing this trend and indications are that numbers are starting to stabilise at around 3000.

My survey indicated that about 65 per cent of members are over 65, 68 per cent are retired, and 62 per cent are ex-service. Only 15 per cent are serving ADF personnel – permanent or Reserve. That leaves about 22 per cent who have no service affiliation. There is of course variation from state to state.

Is there cause for alarm in those figures? I believe not. As long as we keep thinking about membership and better ways to serve our members, we will attract those who are interested in defence and national security. This is not necessarily a large pool, but, with the visibility that defence and security has now, it is probably safe to say that it is a growing pool. Further, while ageing is inevitable, that is being leavened by an increase in younger membership in some states.

I guess the biggest disappointment for many will be the paucity of serving members. Perhaps that is where the real decline has been over the years. Since 2005, there have been Defence-sponsored programmes offering RUSI membership to students at the Australian Command and Staff College and the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, which we hope will encourage the students to maintain their membership when they leave the Australian Defence College. The United Services Institute of the Australian Capital Territory (USI of the ACT) also offers free student

membership to Australian Defence Force Academy students and to entrants via the defence graduate entry programmes, which we hope will bring similar benefits. Last week at the ACT dinner, we had a young Defence Force Academy midshipman who was celebrating her 21st birthday! For the rest, I think the pace of modern service life and the problems of time and distance combine to make it difficult for us to get their interest.

An initiative that might attract this group and others who are remote from our capital city centres is membership through the internet. This is close to being with us and of course depends a lot on our website being able to offer the type of material and services that those brought up with a computer have come to expect. We will get there.

One thing about service membership is certain – we cannot expect the ADF to do the recruiting for us. We have to make ourselves both known and attractive to ADF personnel. We should also take comfort from the longer-term view. We may not get them now, but eventually they will all retire and find, like all of us, that it is a worthwhile and rewarding task to remain in touch with and inform others about, that which has been your life's work – defence and national security.

So, on the membership front, a wider catchment through the internet, a definite play for those in the broader security community, including those at universities, and a targeted approach to serving ADF personnel, are the main thrusts.

We have had a recent proposal to re-initiate the United Services Institute of the Northern Territory following winding up of the existing organisation. That venture failed because it was dependent on the local ADF commander as the driving force. As we all know, commanders change. The new proposal comes from within the community – a salutary lesson for us.

Our Relationship with the Defence Organisation

Our relationship with Defence is excellent, but there is no doubt that it is changing. Defence itself is under great pressure as you know to save money – \$20 billion over 10 years at last count. Defence has also become much more business-like in the way it manages its assets. Hence, formal arrangements for the use of Defence facilities are inevitable. We believe that the RUSI will be designated as a 'Defence Affiliated Organisation' to allow this to be done at no cost to us. The National website still uses Defence assets. We are about to move away from that – something you have already done successfully here in New South Wales – so that we can realise the benefits of sponsorship. Those benefits are of some urgency with the demise of Defence subsidisation of our Triennial International Seminars. In the past, that subsidisation, with the grant-in-aid, was sufficient to run the National Office and its activities for the three

years between seminars. Currently we will be forced to eat into our reserves if sponsorship is not forthcoming, but we are confident that it will. The withdrawal of the subsidisation also means that the seminars, as they were, are no longer viable.

The *quid pro quo* for Defence is our support in promoting a healthy, bipartisan debate on defence and security issues. Part of that is the provision of audiences for defence people with stories to tell e.g. those returning from operational tours, Chiefs with new initiatives to promote and the like. Fora on topical issues e.g. such as those on the white paper held in the ACT, are also useful for Defence. There is also a little bit of internal education, such as the service-specific lectures held annually at the Defence Force Academy and the opportunities offered to Australian Defence College students. But we are in no position to return to the RUSI of old where the professional education of serving officers was a major part of the organisation's activities and nor does Defence want that type of service.

The Role of the National Body

You may have wondered what the purpose of the national arm of the RUSI really is – particularly now that there will no longer be a triennial international seminar or annual national journal. I think that maintaining the relationship with Defence is part of the answer. Defence is increasingly Canberra-centric in its administration and maintaining a national secretariat inside Defence has great benefit in staying in touch as Defence evolves the way it does business.

The primary reason, however, for the existence of the national body is to provide a service to the states and territories. The RUSI remains largely a voluntary organisation, but maintaining that Defence connection requires some permanency of effort. Nearly three-quarters of the grant-in-aid goes to maintaining the part-time Canberra-based staff of two. [The rest goes to the states for a similar purpose.] Those staff are there to provide assistance and to do those things that are most efficiently done at the national level: coordination with Defence I have mentioned; running the national website, national sponsorship, and provision of speakers might be others. In the past, the national secretary has served two masters, the USI of the ACT being the other. That ends next month when the ACT finds its own way forward and the national secretariat devotes itself to national issues. The national executive and secretariat do not seek to usurp the rights and prerogatives of the state bodies – they seek merely to provide assistance. A good example of that is that the new website will have the facility to serve as the membership data base for those states that want to use it as such – a saving to them as a by-product of a facility that is necessary to provide member services on the web across the country. The make up of the existing secretariat will evolve over the

next year to be better able to provide this sort of assistance.

The sort of national assistance I speak of is more applicable in some states than in others. The health of the RUSI's constituent bodies varies across the country. The larger states are generally doing well and could continue to do well on their own. But even they will benefit from coordination of effort in areas of mutual concern. The smaller states, whilst still very active, are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain their relationship with Defence. Decreased Defence presence in the smaller states impacts on the make-up of membership, the ability to attract speakers, the availability of facilities and the know-how within the organisation as to how to rectify those shortcomings and who to talk to in Defence. The national secretariat should be capable of assisting in such circumstances.

Conclusion

That is a wrap-up of the thinking and action over the last year. I might summarise it in half-a-dozen points – my vision for the RUSI in the next five or so years:

- The RUSI will maintain its position as Australia's pre-eminent, bipartisan forum for discussion and dissemination of information on matters of defence and national security. It will not act as a lobby group or be a public commentator on Defence decisions.
- The RUSI will continue to widen the scope of its interest to include all matters and organisations related to national security and to publicise its interest in these areas.
- The RUSI will continue to widen its membership base to include anyone interested in defence and security issues and to include those prevented by geography from attending meetings in person. At the same time, it should give due deference to its service origins.
- The RUSI will have an up-to-date and evolving website which facilitates the exchange of information about, and the discussion of, defence and security issues, as well as providing for administrative efficiencies.
- Whilst continuing to serve Defence's interests in discussion of issues and continuing to utilise Defence facilities, the RUSI, through external sponsorship, will endeavour to reduce its dependence on the Defence purse.
- All of the above will be facilitated by a national secretariat which aims to ensure the continued viability of state and territory bodies.

I hope this vision meets with your agreement.

The Author: Vice Admiral Chris Ritchie, AO, RANR, a career naval officer, is a former Chief of Navy. He became National President of the Royal United Services Institute of Australia last year. [Photo of Admiral Ritchie: Mr David Young]