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## **OPINION**

### **Wanted – a national strategy to guide us all**

Ian Crawford<sup>1</sup>

Commentators regularly bewail the lack of a strategic approach to particular issues. Governments in recent times have announced studies or white papers on defence, relations with Asia, infrastructure, or the Murray-Darling Basin; and the list goes on. Yet, all such issues need to be considered within a wider strategic context and so should be coordinated within a national strategy.

Even for defence, those tasked with the development of a defence white paper are not armed with an authoritative statement of national strategy to guide them on where defence fits into the envisioned way ahead for the whole nation. They need to rely on the guidance of inter-departmental representatives. This is hardly a sound basis for a vital document that needs to represent more than defence perceptions.

In this context, the French approach is instructive. It locates a national planning function in the Prime Minister's office – which is consistent with sound management practice in the corporate world. This central strategic planning function grew from two perceptions when de Gaulle was President of France: firstly that, at the time of the French surrender in 1940, the institutions of France were totally unprepared for war; and secondly, that responsibility for economic, infrastructure and social matters, as well as military matters, required coherence within a national strategy which bore the Prime Minister's authority.

In the French government's administrative arrangements, the central planning function rests with the Commissariat Général du Plan located in the office of the Prime Minister. Through assessments, studies and the comprehensive use of information, the commissariat makes available the product of its undertakings to government departments and industry to provide the information necessary for decision-making on such matters as infrastructure, regional development, industry, social conditions, and sourcing energy and materials. Naturally, foreign relations and defence are contributory components. To this end, the Secrétariat Général de la Défense Nationale is also located in the Prime Minister's office. It is led by a senior public servant with a four-star (NATO three-star equivalent) general as assistant. The outcome is that all government departments and industry have access to consistent and authoritative information from an organisation that is free from the influence of narrow ministerial/departmental perceptions or, even worse, of political special interests. Issues are assessed and progressed to a national plan in a balanced way within a national strategic context and then passed to ministries to implement.

Australia with its federal structure has a different approach to decisions having national relevance, but it is

arguable that the country as a whole, Commonwealth departments, state governments and industry, would all benefit from access to consistent information from an organisation that is beyond the reach of narrow ministry or sectoral influences, and from strategic policy direction with the authority of the Prime Minister. This whole-of-government strategic planning function would need to be located within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. It need not be an expensive new function if achieved through restructuring of existing functions. Adoption of such an approach in Australia would not necessarily require a departure from the Westminster system of ministerial responsibility; it would be merely a recognition that in sound corporate structures, whether business or government, the chief executive has to give the lead for corporate policy and strategy.

Of course grass roots political interests would not wish to surrender their political aspirations to 'frank and fearless' policy development by government officials. The phenomenon of politics getting in the way of good governance has always been a hot potato, but we stand a better chance of getting it right nationally if we get the fundamentals right and then make adjustments for political perceptions, rather than fudging the fundamentals at the outset.

With so many complaining about the cost and inefficiency of political staffer input in our present system, now would be a good time to look at how we might achieve some certainty and coherence in a 'frank and fearless' national strategic outlook developed in, and passed to ministries for implementation with the authority of, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

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