

Australian defence scandal reveals military-government rift

Mike Head
18 April 2011

A scandal over the sexual degradation of a young female officer cadet at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) has revealed deep tensions between the military and the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

On April 5, Channel Ten News broadcast an interview with an 18-year-old air force cadet, identified only as “Kate”, who, while having consensual sex with a fellow cadet, was secretly recorded, with footage streamed live over the internet to male cadets watching in another room. Photos were later circulated around the ADFA campus on mobile phones.

“Kate” went public after senior military officers allegedly stifled an official complaint. ADFA commandant Commodore Bruce Kafer even proceeded with a minor, unrelated disciplinary charge against the young woman, resulting in her conviction and punishment.

Following the news broadcast, a flood of reports emerged involving the similar suppression of complaints about beatings, sexual assault, bullying and victimisation, some of which had led to suicides.

Defence Minister Stephen Smith intervened, alarmed over the negative impact on the military’s public image and on already flagging recruitment rates. He ordered six separate inquiries into the incident, the treatment of women inside the armed forces and other allegations of abusive conduct. Smith also publicly criticised Kafer and privately demanded that Chief of the Defence Force Angus Houston order the commandant’s removal from his post.

According to “senior defence sources” cited by the *Australian*, Houston met with other military commanders on April 8, and “with the full support of the other defence chiefs” decided to reject Smith’s demand. Meeting Smith the following day, Houston reportedly said he would resign rather than sack Kafer, creating what the military sources described as a “Mexican stand-off.”

In the end, a compromise was fashioned. Smith and Houston

staged a joint media conference to announce that Kafer had been sent on leave, ostensibly because the commodore had received abusive phone calls. Asked to respond to reports that Houston had threatened to resign, Smith’s office issued an unconvincing denial, saying “this claim is entirely baseless, without foundation, and not worthy of the speculation.”

The media, government and the military have, unsurprisingly, depicted the ADFA scandal as an isolated instance of “abhorrent” behaviour by young male cadets. In fact, the incident reflects the reactionary climate that is generated inside the military. Numerous official inquiries have been conducted into inappropriate behaviour within the ranks over the past few decades, yet criminal and degrading practices have continued uninterrupted.

Sexist, racist and other backward conduct is part of a “culture” aimed at conditioning military personnel for the de-humanising killing and repression they are inevitably required to carry out in neo-colonial wars and occupations, such as those in Afghanistan, Iraq, East Timor and Solomon Islands. Just last month, Channel 7 News broadcast Internet video footage of Australian troops in Afghanistan making racist slurs against Afghans (see: “Australian soldiers in Afghanistan post racist anti-Afghan comments”).

For its part, the Labor government is seeking to provide the military killing machine with a “gender equality” facelift, in order, primarily, to boost enrolment. At the same time as attacking the latest example of ADFA misconduct, and announcing yet another series of reviews into armed forces behaviour, it declared it would remove restrictions on women serving in combat roles. Prime Minister Julia Gillard summed up the government’s stance when she endorsed the view of former defence chief General Peter Cosgrove that “men and women should have an equal right to fight and die for their country.”

More fundamental issues, however, are raised by the continuing tensions between the military and the government. The Australian Defence Association (ADA), which expresses

the views of the military, labelled Smith's actions as "constitutionally inappropriate." It denounced the "disgraceful scape-goating" of Kafer, demanded that Smith be hauled before an official inquiry, and insisted that the minister publicly apologise to the ADFA commandant.

There is concern in ruling circles over such hints of military insubordination in the academy affair. In the *Australian Financial Review*, Paul Dibb and Geoffrey Barker, both of whom have close connections in the defence and intelligence establishment, warned: "If civil political authority is successfully defied in this minor case, then the prospects will be undermined for civilian authority to prevail in major confrontations over national security policy."

Dibb and Barker outlined a pattern of recent military reluctance to defer to ministerial authority and noted: "At their most mulish, military officers claim they answer ultimately not to the government but to the governor-general who signs their commissions."

Such assertions are predicated on the fact that the Australian Constitution, written in 1901, deliberately preserved the power of the vice-regal representative to direct the military. Section 68 states: "The command in chief of the naval and military forces of the Commonwealth is vested in the Governor-General as the Queen's representative." As well as being commander in chief, the Governor-General has extensive, undefined reserve powers to intervene in a political or constitutional crisis.

During the Canberra coup of 1975, when Governor-General Sir John Kerr dismissed the Whitlam government, he invoked these powers to conduct his own briefings with military generals and to place the armed forces on alert to deal with popular opposition. Assured of the military's support, Kerr effectively tore aside the facade of parliamentary democracy amid rising global and social tensions. An active CIA-backed campaign of destabilisation had been mounted against Whitlam, driven by fears of regional instability in the wake of the US defeat in Vietnam and by concerns that the Labor government had failed to contain an eruption of wage demands and militancy in the Australian working class.

The re-emergence of the issue of military-civil relations points to a developing crisis of the state apparatus that is once again being wracked by sharp differences over Australia's strategic alliances internationally, and by rising social tensions domestically.

Conflicts have already arisen between the Labor government and the military brass, bound up with the deepening conflict between the US and China. In June 2009, one of Smith's predecessors as defence minister, Joel Fitzgibbon, was forced

to resign as the result of persistent media leaks by figures within the Defence Department, with possible assistance from within the armed forces itself, which suggested that he was susceptible to influence by China.

Fitzgibbon's removal followed disputes over the government's Defence White Paper, with so-called "China hawks" in the defence department reportedly rejecting an earlier draft that played down the existence of any threat from China. The final version outlined a significant military expansion, based on an assessment that there could be a "major war" in the Asia-Pacific in the next 20 years, involving Australian forces fighting alongside the US against potential enemies such as China (see: "China relations behind Australian defence minister's downfall").

A year after Fitzgibbon's ouster, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was himself ousted in a backroom coup. A major, unstated factor in Rudd's removal was his attempts to balance diplomatically between the US and China—a position that was unacceptable to Washington as it sought to strengthen its regional alliances against Beijing. Gillard, regarded as more dependable by the US, was installed by Labor and union powerbrokers with close connections to the US embassy.

The underlying dilemma posed by rising tensions between Australia's main strategic ally—the US—and its largest trading partner—China—nevertheless remains. Moreover, Gillard now heads an unstable, minority government, which is preparing to implement severe austerity measures in next month's budget. With international and social tensions sharpening, the latest stand-off between the government and the military is a sign that another major constitutional and political crisis is in the making.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact