

**Shiny pants don't need a pay rise.** By Nick Cater, The Australian, 18 November 2014.

**AMONG the unhelpful side-effects of political correctness is the curse of prolixity, the requirement to say in four words what ought to be said in two.**

The Australian Defence Force, for example, no longer deploys soldiers or staff. It “brings together people elements”, according the mission statement of the Defence People Group, a directorate once known simply as HR.

The DPG was established under Julia Gillard’s government to run the department’s \$10 billion payroll. Its abstruse and ugly mission statement encapsulates much that is wrong with Defence administration. Bureaucratic blather and ad hoc programs run by separate fiefdoms are no substitute for a coherent set of corporate principles.

Effective bureaucracies need clear goals to ensure they keep to the business at hand, which in this case is the sobering task of defending the nation. Benchmarks should be set to remind administrators why they are being paid to turn up. The bureaucracy should have pragmatic, measurable targets to meet.

The DPG’s target, if you can call it that, is to deliver “sustainable people capability” and “high quality human resource outcomes across the Defence employment cycle”. Its benchmarks, heaven help us, are “integrated people systems”, “strategic reform outputs” and “a fair and respectful workforce”.

In other words, it has much in common with the Circumlocution Office in Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, “out of which there was an imposing coming of papers, and into which there was an imposing going of papers ... Boards sat upon them, secretaries minuted upon them, commissioners gabbled about them, clerks registered, entered, checked and ticked them off”.

The person in charge of DPG is Rebecca Skinner, the deputy secretary, Defence People. She is one of a dozen or so elite civilian bureaucrats in the Defence Department who receive a salary in the vicinity of \$300,000 a year, somewhat more, incidentally, than a Major-General.

Herein lies the problem with Senator Jacqui Lambie’s insistence that the nation’s 78,000-odd defence staff should be quarantined from pay restraint.

Few would disagree that the 100 or so troops currently on the ground in Baghdad deserve every dollar they earn and then some. It is hard, however, to make the case for the shiny-trousered battalions of functionaries who make up the bulk of the workforce.

Bureaucratic reform is the challenge facing former Rio Tinto managing director David Peever, who is conducting the First Principals Review of Defence and is due to deliver his recommendations on efficiency and effectiveness next year

Peever and his team have much to work on. The frontline to back office ratio in Defence continues to grow in the bureaucrats’ favour. In 1999, when Australian forces were deployed in East Timor, civilians made up 24 per cent of the workforce. Now it is 28 per cent, and they are rewarded more generously.

The number of senior executive grade public servants — that is to say those on salaries of \$100,000-plus — has increased by half since 2003.

The ranks of those in the highest paid category, SES Band 3, which currently attracts a salary of up to \$450,000, have swelled from six to 11.

Much of this unseemly growth in officialdom can be traced to a decision in the late 1990s to centralise supporting activities that the army, navy and air force once carried out separately. It is a fine idea in principle, but the problem with letting bureaucrats run the back office is that they will inevitably try to take over the front office, and then we are really in trouble.

So it is, one suspects, with the DPG, a division caught up in the prissy, moral crusades of our time and driven by obsessions that bear little relation to the strategic purpose of Defence.

Take, for example, the five-year Defence Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, developed by the Centre of Diversity Expertise. It is more than 20 years since Defence ended institutional discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, yet the department has not yet gone far enough to appease the regiments of social engineers.

The Centre of Diversity Expertise demands “specific strategic communications and marketing” (something we once called “advertising”) to attract lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex recruits. There must be “sexual orientation, intersex and gender identity awareness and education training” and forums to discuss “best practice LGBTI workplace inclusion”. Staff must produce regular reports “on the effectiveness of workplace inclusion initiatives for LGBTI people”; Defence needs “LGBTI outreach programs”.

That Defence, like any modern workforce, should not discriminate goes without saying. The rules against intimidation and bullying are well established and must be enforced. Yet the Centre of Diversity Expertise, like the Circumlocution Office, adopts the cause “as if it were a brand new thing of yesterday, which had never been heard of before; muddled the business, addled the business, tossed the business in a wet blanket”.

Space does not permit us to quote more than a tiny sample of the sanctimonious jargon that oozes from Defence headquarters in Russell these days. Women, Aborigines, Torres Strait - Islanders, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Australians, the disabled and those of a mature age get much the same treatment.

Complying with these morally loaded, but ultimately self-defeating programs wastes countless hours of time and millions of dollars of resources that could be directed to more direct ways of defending the country.

The Defence People Group could, for example, be addressing the chronic shortage of submariners that threatens our capacity to patrol vital sea-lanes.

The shortage is likely to get worse.

If culture change is its goal, Defence could draw on the strengths of the Special Air Services regiment, surely among the most efficient fighting machines in the world, skilled in problem-solving and driven by results.

In any case, the fashionable argument for cultural change ignores the evidence that there are two ADF cultures. The first, a spirit of excellence, determination, ingenuity and achievement, continues to honour the nation in the dangerous and demanding theatres of war in which our troops serve.

The second, the culture of unbridled bureaucracy bent on building an empire on process, platitudes and pretence, is the one that must be reformed.