

Social agendas are sure to wreck the military

By Greg Sheridan, The Australian, 29 January 2016

One of the surest ways to wreck a Western military is to have it viewed excessively as a vehicle for running social and political agendas unrelated to its core job.

Let's remember that the core job of a military force is to fight a war, if necessary, to keep a country safe.

There have been quite a few straws in the wind lately that make you wonder if the attempt to be progressive and politically correct isn't starting to have a slightly weird effect on the Australian Defence Force.

The choice of Lieutenant-General David Morrison as the Australian of the Year is a case in point. It goes without saying that any discrimination against women or abuse of women in the army is abhorrent and has to be opposed and stopped by all necessary authority. But does one angry speech, saying what had been said a million times before, define the career of a soldier? The speech was written by the army's then lieutenant colonel Catherine McGregor, who was named Queenslander of the Year for her advocacy of transgender issues.

The last military man to get this award was Peter Cosgrove. He, poor sod, merely delivered independence to East Timor in the biggest Australian-led military operations in recent times. That can't hold a candle, of course, to social-media advocacy.

And then why did Morrison have to make sure he got every Zeitgeist thought-bubble orthodoxy of the day covered by telling us he's going to speak all year about how we have to become a republic?

Are we really going to have to listen to another year of sanctimonious lectures about what we need to do to become independent, from someone who I thought knew he had spent his life defending a proud and independent nation?

The vast majority of soldiers, I would guess, support the current constitutional arrangements. When it was put to a vote, 55 per cent of Australians did also.

But with Morrison now rolling the republic into gender equity and anti-racist sermonising and all the rest, does that mean those 55 per cent of Australians would be too reactionary or backward-looking to qualify as Australians of the Year themselves?

Publicly supporting a republic is one way for reactionaries to earn credit with progressives, not that I'm suggesting Morrison is secretly a reactionary. But all this ludicrous emphasis in these awards now on advocacy rather than achievement brings a political agenda with it.

Morrison was a competent chief of army but much less influential than his predecessor, Peter Leahy. The Australian at the level of a general who has done the most consequential real soldiering in recent years was Jim Molan, who put his life on the line countless times trying to defend a UN-sanctioned process, and provide the space for an emerging democratic government, in Iraq. Somehow you can't see a nomination for Molan getting traction in the new politicised environment.

The Australian of the Year is meant to have been outstanding in their career and then done something extra. The something extra now apparently is entirely advocacy for any approved social cause. How about an Australian of the Year who doesn't support the republic and has spent his or her life advocating fiscal discipline? Representative and useful at the same time. But on the military side there are a few other worrying bits and pieces around as well.

How can it be that Defence can pay \$20,000 in compensation to one officer for the social-media comments of another officer? Doesn't Defence have any coherent policy on social-media use?

Then there was the truly bizarre episode of the Chief of Navy's Islamic adviser, Captain Mona Shindy. She tweeted and retweeted ridicule of political leaders she apparently didn't like, praised the Grand Mufti after he said Western foreign policy was the cause of terrorism and retweeted comments which disparaged allied bombing campaigns — in which, incidentally, Australian servicemen and women are participating — in the Middle East.

These were bad mistakes by Captain Shindy, yet my chief criticism is not of her but of her superiors. How come they didn't see this had gone very badly wrong from the first such tweet?

There are few things in nature more horrible than the sight of conservatives trying to curry favour with progressives. The result is always clunky and clumsy and messy. Mind you, it's even worse when they finally do learn the dialect of political correctness more perfectly.

There are many ways to wreck a good military.

Let's not try them all.