

# What, exactly, would our troops' mission be in Syria?

Before his election, Prime Minister Tony Abbott expressed his feelings on the ongoing conflict in Syria clearly, cogently and concisely. "We've got a civil war going on in that benighted country between two pretty unsavoury sides. It's not goodies versus baddies – it's baddies versus baddies."

What, exactly, has changed? The decapitation of an American journalist is utterly horrific, yet not any more so than the lining up and shooting of hundreds of Arabs against a wall because, although they worship Allah, they don't happen to belong to the right branch of Islam. Or the beatings, torture or public execution of thousands more, seemingly at the arbitrary whim of the conquering insurgents. Yet nor is



NICHOLAS STUART

this any more barbaric than what's been happening in a multitude of countries throughout the world. Set the hurdle for military intervention this low and we'll be sending troops abroad forever. Even this isn't, however, the real objection to the deployment. It's practical. Who, exactly, are our jets going to bomb? What are the targets? Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the elusive leader of the Islamic State?

Forget it. Even if real-time evidence did allow the accurate delivery of a bomb, the result would be like cutting off the head of a hydra: two new ones would spring up to replace it.

Killing the king isn't a viable strategy because this isn't a kingdom – it's an ideologically powered movement fuelled by intense violence. It can't be surgically removed. Sure, it will be possible to destroy an armed pick-up here and an insurgent there, but this won't eliminate the terror. Bombing the insurrection will limit its expansion and force IS on to the defensive; it won't destroy its capacity to fight and murder. That requires boots on the ground.

This means either Iraqi or Syrian troops. The Iraqis have already

proved they won't fight and previously we were backing the insurgency against Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Does our change of heart mean he actually isn't so bad after all, or is it just we've abandoned hope of winning that particular proxy war? It doesn't seem very long ago that the self-same chorus of "experts" now urging war were promising Assad would fall, if only we were prepared to aid the insurrection. I really wish they would make up their mind.

There is no simple solution. The current map of the Middle East was drawn up after World War I by two middle-aged, heavily moustachioed European gentlemen, Francois Georges-Picot and Sir Mark Sykes. They have kindly faces and I'm sure they didn't intend to condemn different ethnic groups to oppression

when drawing lines across the map of the old Ottoman Empire. Yet their borders ignored minor issues like religion and ethnicity; today those urging intervention want us to defend those same arbitrary borders. Why allow East Timorese, Sudanese and Scots self-determination yet deny Kurds and others their opportunity? Syria and Iraq are already breaking apart. That's how this war got started. So let's not intervene until we have a much firmer idea of what the region should look like before we prop up nations that fragment under our gaze.

Deploying forces fails every test. Yes, the terrorists are horrific but what, exactly, will our troops do and how will they do it? Where will they be based? They may be capable of flying off an aircraft carrier but that

doesn't mean our pilots are trained to do so and the US doesn't have spare berths. There is no possibility that bombing alone will succeed in destroying the Islamic State.

So why has Abbott suddenly become such an advocate for a course of action he so roundly condemned just a year ago? It's important to note that no politician's child will risk their lives. The impression's being given that this is a cost-free exercise. We can bomb the terrorists but they can't hit back at us... so it will all be OK. This is wrong. The days when we could send a gunboat abroad to restore order are over. Decide to participate and we will, at some point, reap the blowback.

Some might see a political motive behind Abbott's actions. Nobody can

defend the horrors being unleashed by al-Baghdadi and bombing the Islamic State seems popular and easy. Abbott has, however, been given firm military advice that this alone won't be enough to crush the insurgents. He's choosing to ignore this. Why? You don't need to be particularly astute to see Australia will unite behind the case for war. This is manna for a politician who's behind in the polls, can't sell their budget and hasn't revealed a long-term vision for the country. The PM looks as if he believes that bombing alone can achieve something. He's ignoring reality and constructing an imaginary world, one where the struggle provides its own reward. It's almost fundamental.

Nicholas Stuart is a Canberra writer.

# Pyne's plans won't fly

The Abbott government has tried to rely on equity arguments to justify making universities less accessible.



RICHARD DENNISS

For American presidents, the State of the Union address provides a once a year opportunity to set out a plan for the direction the country needs to take and the policies required to get it there. The closest Australian governments get is the annual budget speech, provided by the treasurer, not the prime minister.

Australia is one of the richest countries in the world, yet elected governments spend far more time telling us what we can't build than they do telling us what they want to build. The decision to conflate our public finances with our public ambitions in budget night speaks volumes about the Australian leader's lack of confidence.

Of course, for leaders who lack a clear vision of how governments can help tackle some of our problems, what better excuse for timidity than a lack of funds? What better time to release a non-plan for the coming decades than the night a budget deficit is released?

Unfortunately for Joe Hockey, however, the tricks that have worked for previous conservative treasurers just don't seem to work for him. Hockey's plan for the country is to start charging the sick to see a doctor, start cutting indexation rates for the age pension to increase the gap between the richest and poorest Australians and start letting universities charge whatever price they think students can pay for a degree. What better time to announce such a plan than in the middle of a fictional "budget emergency"?

What could possibly go wrong? Everything, it seems. The Abbott government's budget is the least popular "plan" for the country since pollsters started keeping records. Having been elected on a simple, and simplistic, platform that included "no surprises", the Abbott government's struggle to build support for its big plan to do less is hardly surprising. Even the Treasurer now agrees that there is no budget emergency. Luckily for citizens and possibly for the Government as well, the senate has shown no enthusiasm to pass most of the new plan announced by the treasurer in May.

A close look at higher education policy sheds light on how out of touch, with both the public and the Parliament, this government is. Christopher Pyne's "solution" for higher education is to deregulate the price of a university degree and let vice-chancellors charge whatever their students, or their student's parents, can afford. To rub salt into the wound, he wants to charge commercial interest rates on HECS debts. The Government's solution is to shift the cost of higher education from the government onto students.

While the Government has been clear that its solution is students



paying much more for a tertiary education, Minister Pyne has spent virtually no time explaining what the problem he's trying to address is supposed to be. He has told us the taxpayer simply has no more to give at a time that his leader wants to give \$20 billion away for a new paid parental leave scheme. While the Abbott government has also found billions of dollars for roads, submarines and joint strike fighters, it is telling the public there is no money around. It just doesn't wash.

Low-income earners not only drive cars, many of them aspire to go to university, or see their children going to university. The children of the poor are every bit as capable, intelligent, and worthy of opportunity as the children of the rich. The Abbott government has, perversely, tried to rely on equity arguments to justify making universities less accessible. "Why should a plumber pay for someone else's law degree?" asks the Government, when should be asking, "Why wouldn't a plumber's daughter want to be a lawyer?"

In pushing for a massive increase in the cost of living for graduates, the Government has to work hard to divide students from vice-chancellors. To do this, Christopher Pyne has bought the support of some

university administrators in a surprising way. He has promised to cut funding for university research while offering them the opportunity to raise as much money as they can from their students via fee increases.

Desperate to maintain their university budgets, their research output and, in turn, their performance bonuses, many vice-chancellors have been willing to rely on their students to bail them out of a financial hole created by the Government. The Group of Eight elite research universities have lobbied hardest in support of student fee deregulation. The G8 is likely to be able to increase fees most, given their existing prestige, in part based on their research rankings. These increased fees could then pay for more research, increasing their rankings further (and thus their ability to charge students even more). Research rankings are a poor indicator of the quality of the education provided, but universities do focus on them, and the vice-chancellors in the G8 have been reluctant to talk about how much of any fee increases will go on research.

The idea that student fees should cross-subsidise research capacity makes about as much sense as asking sick people to pay a \$7 co-payment to

fund future medical research. University research is important for our society, our economy and even for good government. If the Abbott Government wants to plan for the future by spending less money understanding it then, in a democracy, it is its decision to make. But increasing the price of education in a clumsy attempt to conceal that choice is cowardly and short-sighted.

Luckily for students, not all vice-chancellors have fallen for Pyne's attempt to wedge students and administrators. University of Canberra vice-chancellor Professor Stephen Parker has said he won't negotiate with a gun to his head. In a rare example of clear speaking by the "leadership" of our national universities, Professor Parker has described the government's proposed changes as "unfair, unethical, reckless, poor economic policy, contrary to the international evidence and being woefully explained, raising suspicions about how much thought has actually gone into them". Too right.

Luckily for students, academics, and the beneficiaries of current research, Minister Pyne's plans to deregulate university fees have about as much chance as passing through the senate as the GP co-

payment. That is, going nowhere.

The ALP, Greens and Palmer United Party have all said they are opposed to slugging students to fill a hole in the university budgets that have been deliberately created by Pyne. Given the number of students who live in marginal and regional electorates, it is hard to see how the Coalition backbench could be enthusiastic about the plan.

Given the unique social and economic role of regional universities, it's hard to see the Nationals thanking Joe Hockey for yet another issue that will bleed votes to the Palmer Party.

Our nation is in a strong position. Sure, we have structural problems with inequality, climate change, indigenous disadvantage and the level of public infrastructure investment lagging our population growth. But we don't have a "budget emergency", we need to unwind the massive tax cuts and tax loopholes John Howard left us. An equitable tax system, like a merit-based education system that is accessible to all, is a far better outcome than loading young people with massive debt that can be paid by only the rich.

Richard Dennis is executive director of the Australia Institute. Twitter: @RDNS\_TAI

# The enforced out-of-office

Working 24/7 is no joke, and Germany is taking the punchline very seriously, says TOM CHIVERS.

There is a certain kind of person for whom the phrase "work-life balance" is meaningless, because work is life, and life is work. The body may be home with the dog and the TV, but the mind is still a whirl of stock options and invoices and client meetings; the clock may have ticked past five, but the working day is never over. These people are the beating heart and thrumming lifeblood of any office; they are the people who keep moving because if they don't keep moving they die, like a great white shark or a clown on a giant unicycle.

Those people must have rejoiced when the mobile telephone, that clunky one-note communication tool of yesteryear, a glorified tin-can-on-a-string, mutated and evolved into the all-singing, all-dancing multipurpose supercomputer that we have in our pockets and dismiss with the name "smartphone". As such, every incoming message could buzz satisfyingly and instantaneously on the hip; responses could be drafted and sent without having to do anything so time-consuming as switch on a laptop. Truly, those people were plugged in, forever connected to the world of work; for them, there could be no greater joy.

I am not one of those people. In fact, they are awful people.

Not everyone agrees with me about that. There is a dark god, Productivity, to whom economists, employers and politicians pray. The baleful smartphone and its chirruping You Have Mail call, these warrior-priests say, increases Productivity, glory be His mighty name. Hours previously wasted at the park, having fun, seeing your children, eating in restaurants, drinking single malt, staring raptly into your lover's eyes and so on can now be spent replying to the Deputy Chief Vice-President of Overseas Sales about the annual net usage statistics. And thus the great wheel of the economy turns, greased with sweat, just as it should be. All hail Productivity.

In Germany, though, they appear to be coming around much faster to my way of thinking. The country's employment minister, a wise woman called Andrea Nahles, has proposed an "anti-stress law" that would make it illegal for bosses to email staff outside working hours. It's already illegal, in this enlightened Teutonic wonderland, to expect staff to respond to emails while on holiday, but the great Frau Nahles wants to push further, to protect more German lives from the all-consuming ping of the inbox.

She has a point. Workplace stress is an acknowledged cause of mental illness, especially anxiety and depression. I don't know whether she's right that there is an "undeniable relationship between having to be constantly available and the rise in mental illness" – the most obvious cause for the rise in mental illness is probably the

improvement in how we diagnose it – but it wouldn't surprise me if workplace stress is made worse by the fact that the workplace, nowadays, follows you home.

The relationship between working hours and productivity – and the modern smartphone world – is complicated. According to *The Economist*, Germany has one of the most productive workforces in the world – and, as it happens, some of the shortest working hours. There is a similar story throughout the West – the countries that work smartest work shortest. Greek workers have some of the longest hours in Europe, but do the least with them. And despite the rise of the always-in-touch world, we work, on average, fewer hours than we did in 1990. But spending less time in the

**'Germany has one of the most productive workforces in the world – and, as it happens, some of the shortest working hours.'**

# Why we need an inquiry into asylum-seeker policy

The solution to the issue of boat arrivals is not deterrence but management, writes BRUCE HAIGH.

The performance of Immigration Minister Scott Morrison over the past 10 months makes a royal commission into Australian asylum-seeker "policy" inevitable and urgent. Morrison claims that his rigidly defined and ruthlessly enforced program of deterrence toward asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat has proven a success. In the face of an information blackout we only have his word for it and that is not worth much. We do know that two boats were intercepted in July and that the mistreatment of all 157 on one boat is now the subject of an action in the High Court.

Refugees continue to arrive in Indonesia and it is only a matter of time before Australia is asked to take some, if not all, on the basis that Australia, not Indonesia, is their destination. The policy of deterrence is a short-term solution to a much

bigger problem, it is unsustainable. The solution to the issue of boat arrivals is not deterrence but management, which should include processing in partnership with Indonesia.

Morrison claims, without conviction or credibility, that what motivates him to pursue his unsustainable hard line is the thought of children drowning at sea. He has said he does not want naval or customs personnel to have to look into the faces of drowned children – an appeal he appears to believe will resonate with a sympathetic public. His logic, if that is what it is, is skewed. The same appeal of saving lives can be used for children locked in detention and it has been. He has merely offered a life vest for Howard's "we will decide who comes here".

Appearing on August 22 before the Human Rights Commission inquiry into children in immigration detention, Morrison was asked by commission president Gillian Triggs, "Why do you believe that stopping the boats and stopping the drownings... can be achieved by detaining children?" Morrison responded, "Frankly, Madam President, the results speak for themselves."

Triggs rightly noted there was no evidence for this assertion. Deterrence has become the untested mantra of both major parties. Morrison was accompanied to the hearing by the secretary of his department, Martin Bowles. They both sparked and personally attacked (bullied) Triggs when she described the Christmas Island

detention centre as a prison, which it is. Both men argued that the treatment of children in detention offshore is adequate despite advice to the contrary. The hearing also heard minors had been subjected to force on Christmas Island when being moved between compounds.

Morrison and Bowles do not have the moral high ground to argue the justice of the "policy" they preside over. On August 7, the *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed what some have long known, there is widespread corruption within the Department of Immigration. Material obtained under Freedom of Information details widespread visa fraud centred on people arriving by plane. The revelations add weight to calls for a royal commission into Australia's asylum-seeker "policy" and issues

surrounding it, including administration. The overwhelming need for a royal commission was spelt out by successful Australian businesswoman Janet Holmes a Court in an address in Hobart on August 15. She attacked what she said was the Abbott government's policy of deterrence and the suffering associated with it, especially on Nauru, saying it would have dire consequences for Australia.

In an announcement that appeared timed to influence his treatment at the commission hearing, Morrison said 150 children under 10 would be released from onshore detention into community detention. As we have come to see, his announcement raised more questions than it answered about the ongoing welfare of these children and

of asylum seekers. At the same time there were media reports that Morrison proposed to send 1000 asylum seekers to Cambodia.

Morrison, and Bowles at an earlier hearing, argued that there was too much emotion brought to the issue of detention and deterrence. Nonetheless Morrison proceeded to drap the hearing in emotion by claiming that, as a father, he had an understandable concern for the welfare of all children. It was a crass and cheap shot to drag his children into the mire of his own making.

Particularly so, when nothing in his demeanour and manner of speaking indicated compassion or concern for asylum seekers; quite the opposite, he appears to relish his role as the tough guy in some sort of quasi-military role; the Abbott attack dog.

One expects him to one day front the media in military garb.

Yet as a domestic issue, asylum seekers and boats have gone off the radar in the face of the monumental budget stuff-up. The punters are now far more worried about their back pockets than "illegals".

The zeal with which Morrison and Abbott persecute boat people and will soon pursue Muslim travellers, underlines the racism contained within Abbott's slogan of "Team Australia". But his team is the B Team and not one for which many Australians aspire to play while the rules include demonising asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, students, the sick and disabled, pensioners and the disadvantaged, including Aboriginal Australians.

Bruce Haigh is a political commentator, former diplomat and member of the Refugee Review Tribunal.