

Militarism and Climate Change in Australia

With PM Abbott gone and climate change denial dropping away, agencies everywhere, government and otherwise, are searching for their role in it, putting in their bids now for future relevance and future funding.

On 28 October I was pleased to witness the first public acknowledgement, the first embrace, of climate change by the Australian Defence Forces. Hosted by the UNSW Faculty of Military Studies and The Climate Council in the form of a public presentation by what was dubbed the Australian Climate Security Panel <<http://www.climatecouncil.org.au/the-australian-climate-security-panel?vid=3763>> and it took place at the Australian Defence Force Academy..

The panel comprised retired navy brass from the US, UK and Australian: Rear Admiral David Titley, USN (Ret.), who initiated and led the US Navy's Task Force on Climate Change whilst serving in the Pentagon; Rear Admiral Neil Morisetti, RN (Ret.), who acted as the UK Government's Climate and Energy Security Envoy; Admiral Chris Barrie (Ret.), Australia's former Chief of Defence 1998-2002; and Professor Will Steffen, world leading climate change expert and Climate Councillor.

The audience comprised about 80 other grey heads in suits, presumably Department of Defence personnel and more retired military brass, a scattering of peace and climate change activists and a bunch ADFA cadets in uniform.

One can only welcome and applaud the initiative. It's the beginning of a long conversation and a long rethink of militarism in this land.

The Powerpoint climate change picture they painted was solid in its science and the mood was urgent. And there was a lot of operational speak and stale ideas too.

Still it is good to have the military catching up. Naturally enough there were some gaps, blind spots and abounding self interest in the opening military narrative.

Climate change brings the military particular infrastructure concerns as for example in the impact on bases of rising sea levels. The US Naval base at Diego Garcia from which the US commands the Indian Ocean and directs its wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria has a present elevation of just 1.5 m above sea level. "And that's on a good day," quipped Admiral Titley.

Overall the Panel seemed to see the military essentially as a ready responder to coming climate catastrophes. The military was not seen as a major carbon polluter in its own right. For example a 2010 report on U.S. bases in Colorado (23,000 troops) had greenhouse output equivalent to a small-scale industrial coal-burning power plant.

<http://www.copybook.com/environmental/news/us_military_emissions_assessment_at_army_bases>

Another 2010 report found that multiple studies indicate U.S. spending on military protection of maritime oil transit routes incurs an annual cost of roughly \$100 billion per year.

<<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/07/100721121657.htm>>

"Threat multiplier" is the buzz phrase for the military response to climate change. By which

is meant that the military will have all the present threats to national security and more so.

"Mass uncontrolled migrations" was listed as a major concern; stopping the boats now institutionalised as a key naval responsibility.

A fundamental assumption was that the military will also have a key role in maintaining stability and security in times of natural disasters. The case study quoted was the present catastrophe in Syria and Admiral Titley devoted an entire slide to this. Syria, it was said, suffered a worst ever drought which forced migration to the cities where social unrest became civil war.

Hearing this, lights began flashing on my bullshit detector. This sounded to me like more disinformation from the US propaganda war against Syria's Assad government.

This drought causal theory was not new to me. But the narrative came neither from Damascus nor the Sydney Syrians i know. Rather it came from Brooklyn USA in the form of a comic doing the rounds of Climate Change FaceBook networks.

Now there may be a flutter of truth in this proposition. But as a factor in creating the present disaster in Syria, it I can only weigh less than an eye lash on the elephant in the room. The disaster in Syria is 99% the direct consequence of US 'regime change' policies, it's proxy war there.

This truth ought be writ large: the biggest population displacement crisis since WW2 has not come from climate change but rather from militarism. Could it be that militarism and 'regime change' military solutions are part of the problem?

When i challenged Admiral Titley on this he responded by saying there were many causal factors for the war in Syria. Odd that he hadn't bothered to give 'regime change' a mention. When pressed he responded by calling to the audience: "Hands up who wants to live under the Assad regime?" Already unpopular i made myself more so by mirroring his call: "Hands up who wants to live under the Obama regime?"

Do climate catastrophes necessarily and inevitably produce security problems? I question this.

For example none of the Australian climate change disasters of recent times - seven years of drought, bush fires in Victoria, cyclones in North Queensland, flooding in Brisbane - have led to social instability nor have they needed security force interventions.

To the contrary they have produced enormous social cohesion. These events saw massive community cooperative responses, with citizen volunteers turning out to help along side all-of-government responses. ADF personnel were a welcome addition to this, but not an essential one. No guns were required.

Climate change as a cause of war? Or climate change as an excuse and a cover for war and military spending?

Admiral Barrie was the last panel speaker and he was convinced that the extra responsibilities which climate change would bring the Australian military called for a bigger ADF and

increased military spending.

But maybe it would be a better use of resources to downsize the military and upgrade local area civil emergency services - cops, fieries and ambos. Better to see us using climate emergencies to built civil responsiveness, capacity and resilience rather than preparing for war.

Maybe a first and necessary national response to climate change is to end the US alliance and get the Australian military out of US-led wars.

For sure there will be no binding international agreements on climate change while the US and Israel act as rogue states and undermine the United Nations as a maintainer of international security and coordinator of disaster relief.

For sure, an efficacious national response to climate change is in no need of foreign wars, submarines, attack helicopters, F35 fighter jets and khaki elections.

But let the climate change dreaming begin for the ADF.

Personally I will believe the ADF is serious, rather than self serving, when i see the ADF supporting the citizen "Earth Armies" such as Frontline Action on Coal <<https://www.facebook.com/FrontLineActionOnCoal>> and standing guard to prevent foreign owned corporations from digging huge pits which destroy productive farm land and pollute ground water on massive scale to export coal to fuel more climate change.

That would truly be a defence force of and for the people.

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