

The Canberra Times

Helicopters, torture and leaks? Something's rotten in the state of Defence

By [The Canberra Times](#)

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It's been a tough week in the Department of Defence, and there are no signs of improvement on the horizon.

Torture allegations, a minister under a fire and a helicopter fleet being sold for parts - it's an unedifying litany that has littered Senate estimates hearings and our subsequent news coverage in recent days.

In hearings last week, Defence Force chief Angus Campbell was [forced to take responsibility](#) for the appointment of a Fijian officer as deputy commander of 3000 troops who, it turns out, was alleged to have committed torture.

Colonel Penioni Naliva was appointed the deputy commander of the 7th Brigade in Brisbane as part of an effort to embed Pacific officers in the ADF.

It seems "normal processes" had failed in this instance, and the serious allegations were not detected.

"If you find any fault, that is with me," General Campbell told a parliamentary inquiry on Wednesday.

The colonel is yet to be stood down, and was instead "working from home", a term that has become increasingly used as a euphemism for all kinds of arrangements, and not always the one we became so accustomed to during the lockdown days of the pandemic.

To confound matters, the defence force had been assured by the Fijian government the colonel had a clear police and national security clearance.

The question remains why a security check was not performed on the Australian end, given security checks are part and parcel of even low-to-mid level government staffers.



Under fire: Defence minister Richard Marles. Picture by Elesa Kurtz

Also on the agenda are questions surrounding the whys and wherefores of [Australia's grounded fleet](#) of Taipan helicopters. Grounded three years ago amid safety concerns, the helicopters have since been dismantled, with apparent plans to sell the parts and bury the carcasses.

But Ukraine, meanwhile, is in desperate need of such aircraft to help the war effort against Russia, a request we are seemingly unable to meet.

It's not clear which came first - Ukraine's urgent need or the dismantling of the fleet - and the lack of answers over the exact state of the helicopters is a cause for consternation.

As is the apparent state of flux of the department itself, with recent leaks against Defence Minister Richard Marles adding fuel to the opposition's fire of negative defence-related material.

Also during estimates last week, Defence secretary Greg

Moriarty was [forced to deny reports](#) of tension between the minister and the senior bureaucrats who report to him.

But when is a meeting more than just an average meeting? And when does a minister conveying a sense of his "evolving perspectives and his expectations" amount to "laying down the law"?

Questions during estimates are unlikely to get straight answers when it comes to choppy departmental waters, but there's enough to add to the opposition's needling to be cause for wider concern.

As Peter Jennings, a former deputy secretary for strategy in the Defence Department, said of Mr Marles' apparent approach to his staff, "angry calls to be more excellent won't achieve anything".

But something needs to change in the Department of Defence, which seems, by any measure, to be in disarray, a bad state for a department with so many remits.

A defence minister at war with his own department is bad

enough, but add to that reports of staff shortages and difficulties with recruitment and retention, and something seemingly has to give.

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