Religious Diversity and Secularism in the ADF

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Introduction

In its quest for cultural diversity, the ADF faces a particular and unique challenge in balancing the organisational context of religion and the needs of individuals. Like many Western military forces, the ADF is steeped in history, customs and traditions, many of which have an inherently Christian basis. However, the ADF is now approaching a period where, although it has already identified a need to become increasingly culturally diverse, must also recognise that religion has less overall relevance for an increasing majority of Defence members.

It is already an overlooked reality that the largest 'religious' grouping in the ADF no longer subscribes to, or is affiliated with, a religion.[1] As religion no longer plays the significant role in the lives of Australia's military personnel that it has in the past, it is likely that active and deliberate steps will need to be undertaken to transition the ADF toward secularism in order to remain relevant and attractive to non-Christians, the non-religious and the traditional Christian base alike.

This transition, for an organisation that is still overtly Christian, is non-trivial and likely to be challenging on many levels. However, a failure to adjust to this demographic change may both marginalise a numerical majority of personnel and act as a deterrent to potential recruits from minority religions in society, thus compromising diversity and inclusion objectives.

The evolutionary requirement to become increasingly secular, in concert with becoming religiously diverse, may initially seem to be in competition but they are not necessarily incongruent. It is quite possible that more religions can be represented within the ranks of the ADF and that it can simultaneously have less religious personnel in aggregate.

While the ADF should continue to support those with religious beliefs, it increasingly needs to have the capacity to support a broader range of beliefs, including those personnel with no belief at all. If the ADF is to truly become more culturally diverse, be seen to be facilitating diversity and inclusion, and have the broadest possible relevance for Australian society, then a transition toward secularism is essential, if not overdue.

In this article, the dual concepts of both increasing religious diversity in the ADF, while becoming organisationally secular are introduced. The emerging numerical dominance of the irreligious, non-religious, non-theist and other groupings will be highlighted, and a brief discussion about the possible need for formal advocacy for non-theists outside the traditionally Christian chaplaincy system will be introduced.[2] Ultimately, this article aims to open a discussion on the need for a secular ADF and non-theist advocacy, including welfare and support mechanisms for those who choose not to follow a religion.

The need for religious diversity

A 2013 article by the author on the need for religious diversity suggested that there are many benefits in a religiously-diverse defence force, ranging from reputational, recruiting and operational effectiveness.[3] This view was affirmed in early 2015 by then Assistant Minister for Defence, Stuart Robert, and the Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Defence, Gai Brodtmann, in their Ministerial Statements on 'Defence: capability through diversity'.[4]

These statements provided some indication about the future relationship between religion and the ADF through the diversity lens, and highlighted that 'combat power will be enhanced by widening the national recruitment pool and tapping into the tremendous latent resources that a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce brings to Defence'.[5]

However, although the need for religious diversity seems relatively intuitive, the numerical reduction in religiosity has not received the attention that might seem obvious. Furthermore, the possibility that society will demand secularism in its public institutions has not been considered by an ADF that continues to maintain a relatively high-level (and dominantly Christian) Religious Advisory Committee to the Services, and a Principal Chaplains Committee.

The risk to the ADF is that it will continue to be perceived as predominantly conservative and Christian, when the reality is already different. Hence, while there are strategic benefits to becoming a more religiously-diverse defence force, there are also benefits to becoming organisationally secular, and a move toward secularism should occur in tandem with increases in religious diversity.

Changing religious landscape

In the space of just one generation, the ADF has gone from an overwhelmingly Christian to an increasingly-irreligious organisation. Personnel indicating 'no religion' on census and human resource data are the largest single group in the ADF and, within just a few more years, this group will be numerically larger than all religious groupings combined.[6]

Notably atheism, which is still a relatively small group, is the single fastest growing in the ADF and recently entered the top ten ADF 'religious belief' groupings (albeit with no religious belief). Significantly, if it were classified as a 'religion', atheism would already have a case for advocacy or representation on the Religious Advisory Committee, in accordance with Defence Instructions and the associated memorandum of arrangements.[7]
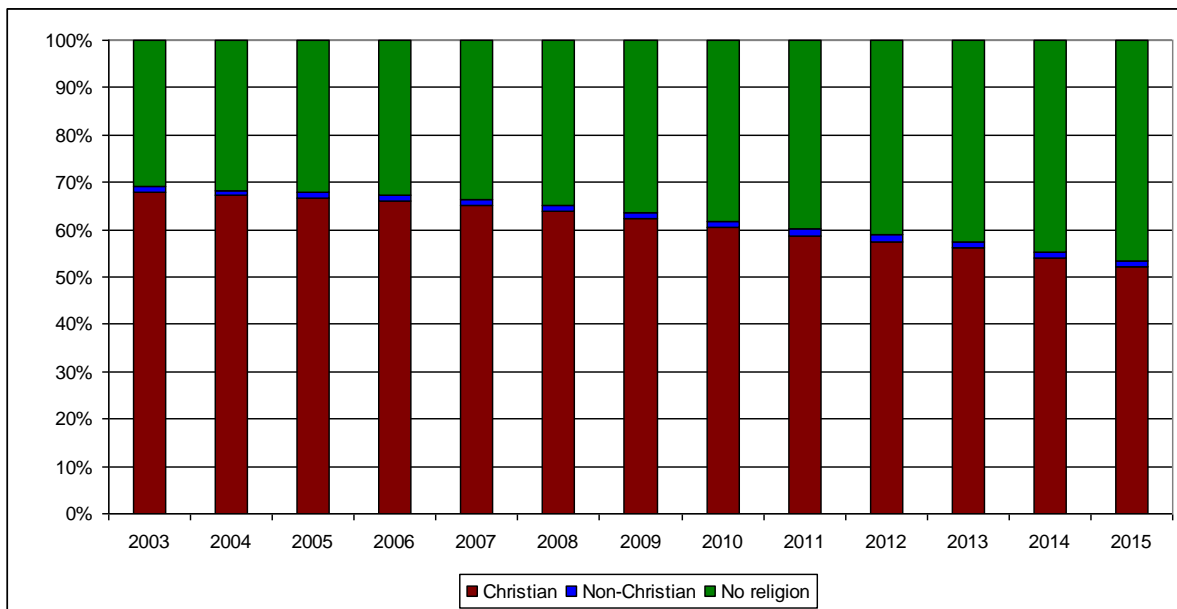

Figure 1: Religiosity of ADF permanent force members 2003-2015

Figure 1 shows the extent and pace of the demographic change in religious affiliation in the permanent ADF since 2003. Just 10 years ago, over two-thirds of all personnel nominated Christianity as their religious affiliation. In 2015, this proportion had reduced to just over 52 per cent, with personnel not identifying a religious affiliation accounting for over 47 per cent, and other non-Christian religions accounting for the remaining 1 per cent. Based on current trends, Christianity will account for less than half of the population by the end of 2016, and those with no affiliation will comprise the numerical majority in the following year.

This change may be even more rapid in junior officers and enlisted ranks. Figure 2 shows that currently 62 per cent of all Privates (E) and 64 per cent of all Officer Cadets and Midshipmen are not affiliated with a religion.[8] Based on these figures, in another 25 years, when these personnel filter into the senior enlisted and officer ranks, almost two-thirds of the ADF will not be affiliated with any religion. Assuming the ADF is successful in attracting personnel from a broader range of society, including smaller religious groups, it is likely that personnel with Christian affiliation will account for less than 30 per cent of the ADF by 2040.[9]

This changing landscape is in very stark contrast to previous generations, where religious affiliation was stable: one was either of a Catholic, Anglican or Protestant denomination. The near-binary nature of religious affiliation in previous generations is hinted in Figure 2, which indicates that over 87 per cent of the ADF's current star-ranked officers (typically recruited in the early 1980s or earlier) are affiliated with Christianity, as are 80 per cent of WO1s (E). This difference between the junior and senior ranks is significant and demonstrates the rapid and consistent change in religiosity in the ADF since the 1980s.
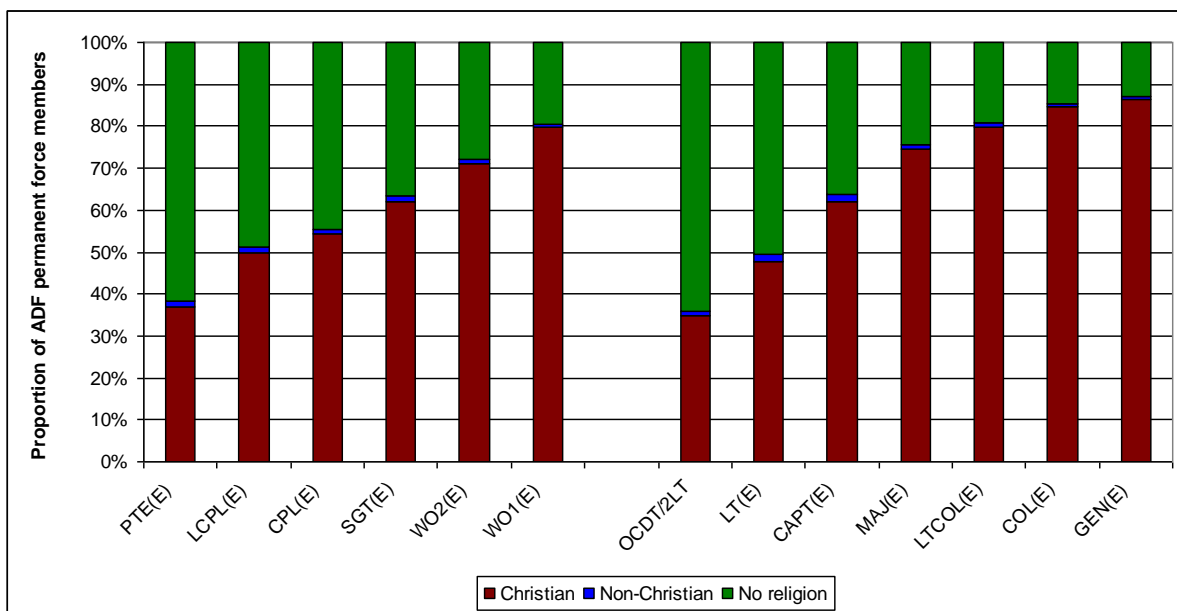

Figure 2: Religiosity of ADF permanent force members by rank as at July 2015

The emerging demographic, decreasing religiosity and stated desire to be more diverse and inclusive should encourage Defence to question the traditional hierarchical level and status that is currently afforded to religion in the ADF. In order to become visibly secular, religion will need to be transposed from its current and unique status within the ADF to the same level at which other dimensions of diversity, such as gender, LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex), and indigenous affairs are considered.

As is already the case with these other dimensions, religion in the ADF may need to be subtly re-framed to specifically provide support to those members for whom it is necessary, rather than the current model that presumes an overwhelmingly religious population. This would require consideration of religion as a dimension in the culture and diversity spectrum, rather than its current stand-alone position in the workforce dialogue.

The growing strength of non-theists

While religiosity itself has been declining in the ADF, declared atheism has been the fastest growing 'religious' grouping in the ADF, increasing in strength from just 89 in 2003 to over 470 in mid-2015. This

makes them the eighth largest religious grouping and roughly the same strength as Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs combined. Additionally, agnostics have tripled in strength over the same period and are just outside the largest ten denominations. Some of this may be due to a greater societal awareness of atheism and non-theism; however, the growth also likely reflects a genuine shift in belief systems in Australia and in the ADF. Table 1 shows the change in the proportion of each religious affiliation between 2003 and 2015.

Table 1: Comparison of 20 largest religious groupings/denominations in the ADF, between 2003 and 2015

rank	2003		2015	
	Religion/denomination	%	Religion/denomination	%
1	No religion	30.69	No religion	45.38
2	Christian - Catholic	25.91	Christian - Catholic	21.69
3	Christian - Anglican	25.06	Christian - Anglican	15.48
4	Christian - Uniting	5.44	Christian - Other Protestant	6.79
5	Christian - Other Protestant	2.55	Christian - Uniting	2.88
6	Christian - Presbyterian/Reformed	2.53	Christian - Presbyterian/Reformed	1.35
7	Christian - Other	1.83	Christian - Lutheran	0.87
8	Christian - Baptist	1.35	Atheist	0.83
9	Christian - Lutheran	1.31	Christian - Other	0.80
10	Christian - Salvation Army	0.46	Christian - Baptist	0.78
11	Christian - Eastern Orthodox	0.40	Christian - Eastern Orthodox	0.43
12	Christian - Pentecostal	0.40	Agnostic	0.35
13	Christian - Churches of Christ	0.38	Christian - Pentecostal	0.31
14	Buddhist	0.31	Buddhist	0.30
15	Christian - Latter Day Saints	0.17	Hindu	0.26
16	Atheist	0.17	Christian - Salvation Army	0.25
17	Christian - Seventh Day Adventist	0.10	Christian - Churches of Christ	0.22
18	Agnostic	0.10	Muslim	0.17
19	Muslim	0.09	Christian - Latter Day Saints	0.16
20	Judaism	0.06	Christian - Seventh Day Adventist	0.11
	Other	0.68	Other	0.57

It is notable that atheists and agnostics often make a very deliberate decision to designate and self-declare their religious views, rather than the more passive default of 'no religion'. This deliberate and

personal decision has potential ramifications in the diversity sphere because it is likely that some atheists are not only irreligious but passionate about the removal of religion from public institutions.

Such personnel, although likely to be small in number in the ADF, may be vocal and likely to campaign for organisational secularism, a possibility that Defence's leadership may need to consider in the future and for which it is currently ill-prepared. It is likely that this group of non-theists will, in the passage of time, request equality of influence, consideration and advocacy from Defence's leadership.

Non-theist advocacy and the Religious Advisory Committee

This article has suggested, based on numerical strength and supported by Figures 1 and 2, and Table 1, that religious faith-based support services will not be required to the same extent they have in previous generations. However, this does not suggest that they are not required at all. The ADF, as with society, will continue to have a large number of individuals who are dedicated to their religious beliefs and who require advocacy and support in pursuit of their faith.

However, Christian denominations are not the only groups where such support and advocacy will be required and, while there is an increasing need for the involvement of leaders from non-Christian faiths in Defence, it is also likely that non-religious groups will require advocacy and representation in their own right as they become larger, more visible and more clearly defined.

While non-theists may not necessarily require specific advocacy support in the same way that religious personnel do, the current lack of advocacy, support networks and discussion groups run the risk that this large and emerging demographic will be under-represented in relevant forums. Eventually, and as soon as late 2016, the Religious Advisory Committee will not represent the majority of Defence personnel or its fastest growing 'religious' groupings.

Without the inclusion of atheists, irreligious and non-theists in the diversity debate, there will be a continuation of the disproportionate influence of religion on military affairs at a time when strategic secularism is a more desirable objective for diversity and inclusion. However, to achieve well-balanced advocacy for the variety of religious affiliations likely to be represented in the ADF of the future, there will be a need to actively and deliberately create advocacy mechanisms within the diversity and inclusion dialogue.

A diverse but secular ADF – the benefits of secularism

In the main, Australian Government departments are secular, and religion has almost no perceived or actual influence on the organisation.[10] Defence is one of very few State, Territory and Federal Government departments that maintains a large number of ongoing positions for chaplains, and the only department that holds both high-level (one-star/SES-band) and public office holder positions for the provision of strategic religious advice 'to provide the link between the ADF and the governing bodies of Church and Denominational Groups'.[11] Whether perception or otherwise, this status of religious influence means that the ADF is functionally non-secular and that religion, especially Christianity, is ingrained and deeply imbedded in its organisational structure at a relatively high level.

Notwithstanding the current status of religion in the ADF, it is possible to have both a strong advocacy structure, and still become a secular organisation. Such an approach would require several antecedents. Firstly, broader representation of religious minorities and non-theists would be required either as part of or parallel to the Religious Advisory Committee, with an equivalency of status.[12]

Secondly, the hierarchical influence of the Religious Advisory Committee and Principal Chaplains Committee would need to be placed at the same level as that of other diversity advocates, committees and forums. Once achieved, there are many significant benefits for the ADF, without detracting from or removing any of the support offered to personnel currently provided by the ADF's chaplains, as follows.

- **Perception of the ADF on operations.** It is likely that a largely Christian military operating in an environment where the local population, allies or adversary are not Christian, does the ADF few favours. At one extreme, it provides an adversary with another point of difference and a theological

reason to maintain a conflict or target ADF personnel. To an equal extent, it can present social, cultural and religious barriers with the local population. While being secular may not necessarily mitigate this perception, being 'less Christian' might.

- **Perception of the ADF at home.** The ADF still has a largely white, Anglo-Saxon and male-dominated population.[13] To some extent, and in a different era, this type of population may have reflected society's expectations of its military. But this is no longer the case and the ADF cannot afford to be so significantly and demographically disconnected from the population it defends if it wishes to remain a well-regarded, modern and representative military. A detachment from religion and visible appearance as a secular public organisation would provide the ADF with social legitimacy and would become increasingly important for the reputation of the ADF as the nation's population changes.

- **Enhancement of recruiting.** A visibly non-secular organisation is likely to present a barrier to entry to some potential recruits, including those from non-Christian backgrounds and non-theists. While non-theists may be less deterred from entry, it is reasonable to expect that a candidate who is Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Muslim or of another non-Christian religion would not view a visibly Christian organisation positively or feel that their needs could be supported within that organisation. Removal of this perception may be sufficient to facilitate greater numbers of recruits who may also be from more culturally-diverse backgrounds.

- **Organisational inclusivity and acceptance**. Although there have been some recent advances, the ADF overwhelmingly remains a binary organisation where its members are Christian or not. There is very little recognition of the diversity of views and beliefs that already exist and almost no organisational attempt to understand this diversity. While the 2012 *Guide to Religion and Belief in the Australian Defence Force* mentions non-religion/non-belief (at the very last section of the document), theological beliefs are not equally catered for by Defence. When the ADF is visibly and truly secular, all its members would be able to feel and observe that their beliefs are treated equally and considered in the diversity dialogue.

- **Consolidation of counselling services.** A range of Defence personnel, including chaplains, currently provide counselling services for serving ADF personnel. The long-held view that chaplains can adequately support the counselling needs of the widest range of beliefs in the ADF's population, including non-Christian beliefs, is not as easily supported as it once might have been.[14]

  While some irreligious and non-Christian individuals may feel comfortable seeking welfare support from a Christian chaplain, this is increasingly unlikely to be the case and will result in a demand for non-theist counsellors, psychologists or chaplains from minority religions. Secularism provides an opportunity to consolidate and coordinate the provision of counselling services so that it can be targeted towards the specific needs of the population rather than trying to adapt a non-secular model to a diverse population.

- **Development of a non-theist community.** Although not all non-theists would necessarily wish to be involved with an associated community, recognition of secularism and the diverse views of members would permit and facilitate the development of support networks and forums for those who do. The theist community already has many such communities, including the Military Christian Fellowship of Australia, Focus Military Ministry, The Australian Navigators, Solid Rock Ministries, Red Shield Defence Services and Everyman's Welfare Services, hence there is scope for active encouragement of the creation of other groups to support the broad range of beliefs that already exist.

Pathway to secularism

In principle, a conceptual pathway to a secular ADF is not difficult to achieve. However, secularism would entail a reassessment of over a century of customs and traditions which has resulted in Christianity being threaded through many seemingly routine activities, ceremonies and symbols. Nonetheless, while there may be no need to remove some customs and traditions, the current existence of Christian influence in

the ADF does not provide an adequate reason for their continuance where they inhibit an aspiration of secularism.

There are several approaches that might facilitate an evolution toward secularism, ranging from a dramatic removal of religion and its references from all aspects of military life, to a more passive approach that accommodates religious diversity in all its guises. While the latter is more likely to succeed, both options would require the ADF to carefully reconsider the existing need and hierarchical position of the Religious Advisory Committee and the role of the Principal Chaplains Committee. Initially, the ADF would also need to critically review the current involvement of religion, especially Christianity, in the traditions of the ADF, including activities such as commencement ceremonies, graduations, formal dinners, memorial services, counselling services, external affiliations and general symbology.

Once such a review is completed, the ADF could then consider each activity separately with a view to enhancing those where more religious diversity is achievable, retaining others where the religious connotation has been lost over time, or removing those that are no longer required or could be viewed as insensitive. For example, counselling services may need to become broader, ceremonies may need to become multi-religious, and other activities may need to be discontinued altogether. Importantly, any activities where one religion is over-represented or dominates should be reassessed with particular focus on the perception of that activity and the relevance of religion in that activity.

The method that the ADF uses to achieve secularism will require, like other aspects of diversity, a deliberate, sensitive and well-thought-out strategy. In many quarters of society, the observance of religion remains a highly-contentions and emotionally-charged issue, including the freedom to exercise no religion. However, as exhibited by its gender and LGBTI strategies, which had their own sources of internal and external change resistance, the ADF is wholly capable of transitioning to a secular organisation should it choose to do so.

Conclusion

The ADF is on a journey of increasing its diversity across many dimensions but, despite significant demographic changes in religious affiliation that have already occurred, religiosity and secularism remain marginal and elusive topics. It is a reality that religion no longer plays the same role in the everyday lives of a large proportion of servicemen and -women that it once did. Yet organisationally, Christianity remains prominent in many of Defence's current-day activities. As the predicted number of non-religious personnel reaches and then exceeds a numerical majority in the next two years, Defence should reconsider the organisational position that religion currently holds.

Reviewing the role of religion will not be easy for the ADF, not least because of its intricate association with many customs and traditions. However, there are good reasons to pursue a secular military. A secular ADF would remove many cultural barriers to entry, encourage a more balanced perception of its personnel, and position it as a truly impartial organisation that is able to adapt to a wide range of operational environments free from religious constraints.

In reflecting the broader range of beliefs that exist in Australian society, it will become increasingly important that the ADF is perceived as an institution able to fulfil both the needs of its members and the secular expectations of the nation. If this is not achieved, the ADF will risk perpetuating an image that isolates it from both its own membership and the Australian population.

Despite the changing religiosity, the need to become secular does not reduce the significant role that religion has, and will continue to have, in the lives of many Defence personnel. Even though their strength is declining, the ADF will still need to provide support to those wishing to pursue their religious beliefs; however, it will need to do so in a renewed context through the lens of cultural diversity.

To achieve this, religious advocacy committees will need to be positioned at the same organisational and influence level as other diversity committees and forums. Simultaneously, the ADF will need to increase its ability to support non-Christian religions and non-theists in the same way that it currently provides support to its Christian personnel.

For the same reasons that Defence wishes to be perceived as an inclusive employer of women, Indigenous Australians and members of the LGBTI community, it should also aspire to appeal to a broad range of recruits from diverse cultures and religions. In its journey to achieve this, the ADF will need to take measures to become visibly and functionally secular far beyond the application of its associated rhetoric. This will provide some challenges for the ADF and may need some of its long-held views, customs and traditions to be examined closely through the context of diversity and inclusion. Such challenges have been successfully faced and overcome by Defence before, and it can be done again.

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Notes

[1]   In the context of cultural diversity, this article considers religion to be intricately linked to culture.

[2]   There are many emerging terms for non-religious individuals. This article uses them interchangeably with much the same meaning but it is recognised that in literature some distinctions are often made. These terms include but are not limited to atheism, agnosticism, apatheism, humanism, non-theism, rationalism, anti-theism and others.

[3]   P. Hoglin, 'Religious diversity in the Australian Army: the next diversity frontier?', *Australian Army Journal*, Vol. X, No. 3, 2013, pp. 79-96, available at <http://www.army.gov.au/~/media/Army/Our%20future/Publications/AAJ/2010s/2013/AAJ_2013_3.pdf> accessed 8 February 2016.

[4]   Government of Australia, 'Parliamentary debates: House of Representatives Ministerial Statements, Defence: capability through diversity', 2 March 2015, pp. 1643-1649, available at <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p:query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansardr%2Fdc5babf6-d13a-4d24-9679-f44e8a7ac864%2F0152%22> accessed 8 September 2015.

[5]   Government of Australia, *Parliamentary debates,* p. 1644.

[6]   Data from the 2011 Defence Census (internal to Defence) indicated that 37 per cent of permanent force Defence personnel reported no religious affiliation (2011 PMKeyS data indicated 39 per cent). 2015 census data was not available for this article at the time of publication.

[7]   Department of Defence, *Defence Instructions (General) Personnel 26-1*: *Religious Advisory Committee to the Services and Principal Chaplains' Committees,* Department of Defence: Canberra (internal to Defence), states that a 'denomination/faith-group with more than 250 self-declared adherents in the permanent forces may subsequently approach the Minister for Defence for representation through the Religious Advisory Committee'. This requirement has been removed from the recently-released *Defence Chaplaincy Manual*.

[8]   Between 2011 and 2015 (inclusive), an average of almost 5300 permanent force members were recruited each year, 63.9 per cent of whom did not indicate a religious affiliation. In 2015 alone, 70.0 per cent did not indicate a religion.

[9]   The ADF should not necessarily be surprised by this rapid change, as it is not unique to the ADF. Although the rate of change is somewhat faster, the same trend exists more broadly in the Australian population, where almost 40 per cent of young Australians aged between 20 and 29 either had no religion or their religion was not stated on the 2011 census.

10   Some police and emergency service departments continue to have a small number of chaplains, although their employment status and funding within the organisation varies from that of an employee to an honorary appointment, to a volunteer association in times of higher demand. Some State and Territory schools also utilise the National School Chaplaincy Programme. Even when used, chaplains provide targeted religious support to the membership. There is no equivalent to the high-level religious advocacy structure offered by Religious Advisory Committee and the Principal Chaplains Committee in Defence.

11   Department of Defence, *Memorandum of Arrangements Between the Commonwealth of Australia Represented by the Chief of the Defence Force and Heads of Churches Representatives (Religious Advisory Committee to the Services)*, Department of Defence: Canberra, 2 December 2008 (internal to Defence). The responsibilities and authority of the Religious Advisory Committee, as outlined in the memorandum, is extensive and includes advice, policy development, selection and recruitment and other matters usually associated with command and administration.

12   In creating an advocacy for non-theists, it is acknowledged that the notion that a 'majority' demographic would need its own representation in a diversity context may seem a little inconsistent with other diverse workforce segments that are clearly under-represented in the ADF. However, non-theists have historically constituted a minority, and retain many of the associated characteristics.

13   Furthermore, chaplaincy itself remains remarkably homogeneous. As at July 15, 95 per cent of all permanent chaplains were male, their average age was 51 (just 10 per cent are under the age of 40), over 83 per cent are married, 83 per cent were born in Australia or the UK and only 2 have self-identified as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. These figures make chaplains among the least diverse employment category in ADF.

14   To a regular serviceman or -woman, chaplaincy and religion are inextricably linked. Chaplains dress according to their faith, are often identifiable by religion in their accoutrements, have offices adorned with religious artefacts, coffee tables and desks have bibles, and hymn books reside on bookshelves. This reality means that the provision of welfare support by chaplains can potentially and increasingly be confronting and inappropriate for non-theists, exemplified by a current brochure, 'Army Chaplains: a force for hope', asserting that a chaplain is 'first and foremost a priest/minister/pastor of his or her particular religious group or church'.