

Opinion

Defence needs defending from the blame game cycle



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The fall of Joel Fitzgibbon has promoted the view that the Department of Defence is a "graveyard" sure to bring down the career of its minister. There have been six defence ministers in 13 years. And Defence has been their undoing, right?

Wrong. None of these ministers was brought down by the portfolio, not even Fitzgibbon. Four of them retired from politics: Ian McLachlan, John Moore, Peter Reith and Robert Hill. Brendan Nelson's term ended when the Coalition was defeated at the 2007 election.

Why did so many ministers leave politics after serving in Defence? Not because it was a bad job, but because it was a good one. No department treats its minister better than Defence. The military provides uniformed aide de camps. There are receptions at the military bases, on warships and in the officer's mess. There is no shortage of picture opportunities, with the minister flying the latest Defence aircraft or visiting the troops on foreign battlefields. The minister controls the VIP flight squadron. And the defence minister is treated like royalty in a foreign country.

Defence might have arguments about funding, but these are with the treasurer and finance minister, not its own minister.

Defence is a highly sought-after job. The former prime minister John Howard awarded it to trusted and respected members of his government to cap off a successful political career.

Reith? His controversy came as minister for industrial relations during the waterfront dispute and, to a lesser degree, over the use of a Telecard. He was

posted to Defence to give him a breather from controversy. His troubles occurred before he got there. As did Fitzgibbon's.

Fitzgibbon had two problems: one was his association with the Chinese businesswoman Helen Liu; the other was the business dealings of his brother, Mark. One is a sackable offence. He survived that one. He lost his job over a much more minor matter.

Fitzgibbon never explained why he failed to declare his all-expenses-paid trips to China provided by Liu. By failing to declare these trips, he contravened parliamentary rules. Once he became defence minister he was at the mercy of anyone who knew about the trips. They had the means to publish information that would embarrass him – possibly cost his career. He had been compromised.

The most damaging observation about Fitzgibbon's association with Liu came from his former best friend, Mark Latham. Latham wrote: "During my time in public life I never encountered MPs so engaged politically and financially with a business benefactor."

Fitzgibbon said that by failing to declare these trips he made a "mistake". This was the explanation Marcus Einfeld gave when he nominated a dead person as the driver of his car. It was just a mistake. What was the mistake? Thinking the facts would never come out?

Fitzgibbon survived that episode. In my view, the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, felt he could not take action over sponsored travel to China. The only person who has taken more trips to China paid for by Chinese business interests is Rudd himself. Rudd says he has declared all his sponsored trips. But

it would be a messy execution.

So Fitzgibbon lost his job because there was a meeting in his office that included a few of his staff and his brother, who was lobbying for health business. It was a poor choice of venue. He maintains he did not even know it happened. Ministers will have friends and relatives lobbying the government all the time. Sometimes staff will see them. Relatives should not get special favours. By the same token, they cannot be banned from meeting ministers. In this case Mark Fitzgibbon received no benefit. Nothing like the benefit of his brother's trips to China.

When the Liu story first broke it was not reported as a story about how Fitzgibbon had broken parliamentary rules or could have been compromised. It was reported (shock, horror) that Defence was spying on its own minister over the relationship. The spin was that Fitzgibbon was the victim rather than the culprit. Fitzgibbon kept his job. Defence was placed under suspicion.

No evidence of Defence spying on Fitzgibbon was ever found. As Latham's comment shows, plenty of people in Canberra knew about the Fitzgibbon-Liu association. These included people in the Labor Party who may have all sorts of reasons to cut down a rival.

So why did the journalists target the department rather than the minister when they broke the story? Well, everyone knows Defence undermines its ministers, don't they?

I don't.

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