Pointless or Populism?

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This article began as a response to Daniel Cook's recent article on 'Turning the Tap Off – Stopping the Flow of Pointless Jobs in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF)' (Cook, 2023); as such, it will address some of the points raised in that article within the context a broader trend towards what I term 'military populism'.

Cook's article provides a comprehensive overview of the types of pointless jobs that may be present in an organisation, and the need to remove those jobs to improve combat effectiveness. There are two inherent assumptions in this argument: firstly, that pointless jobs in the RAAF are the cause of inefficient processes that inhibit our ability to optimise combat effectiveness; secondly, that organisational efficiency leads to combat effectiveness. These two assumptions are worth critical evaluation.

Cook (2023) connects the use of rank as a financial incentive, and the resulting rank inflation, with the creation of unnecessary layers of command. Delinking rank from financial incentive would therefore allow for the removal of those unnecessary layers, and the pointless jobs associated with those layers. Given that we have a proportionally higher number of star-ranked officers than both the Australian Army and the United States Air Force despite having similar command structures, this seems like a worthwhile goal. However, it is unclear exactly what the RAAF does differently to both the Australian Army and the USAF that allows those organisations to have a leaner number of star-ranked officers. Given the fact that the Australian Army also has a higher proportion of star-ranked officers than both the US Army and the US Marine Corps combined[1], and the on-going discussions in the US military about reducing their proportion of star-ranked officers (Congressional Research Service, 2019; McCarthy, 2017), it may be premature to use other Services' structure as justification to reduce RAAF star-ranked officer headcounts without establishing the ideal number of star-ranked officers.

To test whether removing organisational layers would result in increased efficiency requires a simple thought experiment: what happens if we remove layers of command? Unfortunately, the answer is no increase in efficiency. Removing organisational layers does not remove the need for the work to be completed. A decision brief for an Air Commodore (AIRCDRE) to accept a certain risk still requires an AIRCDRE's signature, regardless of who staffed up that decision brief by either a squadron, wing, or group headquarters. Moreover, the RAAF provides fewer people at headquarters elements to do staff work, while the Australian Army expects Lieutenant Colonels (LTCOLs) to routinely manage similar work of up to 600 personnel at the battalion-level. The army are supported by proportionately larger command teams at the platoon, company, and battalion levels (Australian Army, 2015a; Australian Army,

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[1] The Defence Annual Report 2021-2022 (Department of Defence, 2022) identifies that the Australian Army has a significantly higher proportion of star-ranked officers (86 Brigadiers or higher, approx. 1 in 321) than reported by the Defense Manpower Data Center (2023) for both the US Army (approx. 1 in 1,652) and US Marine Corps (approx. 1 in 1,940).

2015b) than what the RAAF provides to Wing Commanders (WGDCRs) at the equivalent levels[2]. For the RAAF, the increased risk from consolidating layers of command leads to a requirement for more military bureaucracy to manage risks, either at or above the squadron, effectively replacing vertical layers of command with horizontal growth of the remaining headquarters organisations.

Rather than the assumption that pointless jobs have led to inefficient organisational processes, I contend that the opposite is true. Our organisational processes have created a culture and environment where decisions require elevation to senior decision-makers. These processes exist for four separate but related reasons:

1. The RAAF is unlike the other Services in having a much narrower separation between Raise, Train and Sustain (RTS) functions and operational deployments, and consequently needs to simultaneously maintain a 'deployed/operational' Air Force (the Air and Space Operations Centre), an 'RTS' Air Force (Air Command), as well as a 'capability management' Air Force (Air Force Headquarters).

2. The RAAF has accepted the risk of a large gap between our Directed Level of Capability against our Operational Level of Capability, especially as 'routine operations' have gradually increased over time without necessarily triggering a corresponding increase in DLOC.

3. The high consequences of Air Force activities, even in peacetime, means that our risk management structures naturally elevate the level at which those risk decisions need to be made.

4. The RAAF has a higher contribution to Joint positions than the other two Services[3] – due in part to greater involvement in the space and cyber domains.

Cook's (2023) second assumption is that removing bloated hierarchies to improve organisational efficiency will also increase combat effectiveness. Searching for efficiencies by applying corporate business models to military organisations is fraught with risk – we are in the business of war, which requires some degree of organisational *inefficiency* to increase combat effectiveness. Inefficiency in personnel numbers (i.e. the "pointless jobs" that Cook identifies) is beneficial for the RAAF in a number of ways: (1) it creates a ready supply of trained personnel as a no-notice surge capacity; (2) it creates redundancy to replace casualties in conflict; and (3) it enhances our ability to rapidly expand the force when activating the Reserve and mobilising the broader Australian population.

Logistical inefficiency in the RAAF is also a requirement as well. '*Just-in-Time*' procurement strategies create organisational efficiency by reducing warehousing and inventory management requirements and limiting wastage of perishable supplies (Jenkins, 2021). On the contrary, the RAAF needs to use '*Just-in-Case*' procurement strategies to maintain an excessive and ready supply of everything from guided weapons to aviation fuel to aircraft so we can always maintain the ability to meet unexpected operational requirements.

The four contributing factors identified earlier can be solved, though that is a separate discussion for another time. Instead, it is worth addressing a broader trend towards 'military populism' in the face of the Australian Defence Force's (ADF's) current strategic context (Williamson, 2023; Joyce, 2022; Cirakovic, 2023). 'Populism' appears to be an appropriate

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[2] Australian Army (2015a) identifies seven personnel within a company headquarters. The RAAF typically has no more than two personnel at the flight executive level (one FLTLT-SQNLDR and one SNCO). At the battalion-level, there are ~70 personnel in either battalion or company headquarters elements, along with ~70 personnel in the admin company, compared to ~10 personnel in command elements in a typical RAAF squadron.

[3] An internal report within Defence states over 20% of RAAF personnel are posted outside of Air Force units; in comparison, less than 10% of Army personnel are posted outside of Army units, and slightly less than 20% of RAN personnel are posted outside of Navy units.

term given some key characteristics (Otto, 2022) that appear common to viewpoints such as that expressed by Cook:

1. Creation of an 'other' that is portrayed as out of touch or the cause of the problems being experienced by 'the people'. In this case, the 'people' are junior RAAF members, and the 'other' are those O5-O7 ranked senior officers.

2. Simplification of complex issues, often with emotional attachment, to justify the need for action. In this case, the identification that the RAAF has too many general officers, many of whom are doing "bullshit" jobs.

3. A simple, emotionally gratifying solution that targets the 'other'. In this case, if we just get rid of some of the O5-O7 senior officers, then the RAAF's problems will cease to be, and our combat effectiveness will be significantly enhanced.

While such ideas may be popular, particularly with junior members of the organisation, the realities of running any complex organisation mean that enduring changes are equally as complex to embed and sustain. While I cannot claim that the growth of RAAF senior officer positions has been deliberately managed over the long-term, I believe that it is unwise to simply delete portions of the organisation to see if things are better for their removal. In the same way that an electrical engineer does not build a more efficient car engine by removing random components until the engine stops working, creating actual efficiency requires careful analysis and planning. I am reminded also of the principle of Chesterton's Fence – the concept that change should not be made until the reasoning for behind the current state of affairs is understood (FS Blogs, n.d.).

Change, as Cook (2023) points out, is hard, and changes to our rank structure are particularly difficult given how intimately rank is tied to so many aspects of how the military functions. Given the RAAF's current recruitment and retention issues, this is an important discussion now and in the future – but simple solutions to complex problems ultimately detract from that discussion. After all, if simple solutions really would work, then why haven't they been implemented already?

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