

THE HON. GREG COMBET MP
Minister for Defence Personnel, Materiel and Science

Monday, 23 November 2009	
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**RAPID PROTOTYPING, DEVELOPMENT AND
EVALUATION PROGRAM – BIENNIAL MEETING OF
PARTICIPANTS**

Hyatt Hotel, Canberra

Check against delivery

SPEAKER: THE HON GREG COMBET MP

I would like to thank Vice Admiral Matt Tripovich and Air Vice-Marshal Jack Plenty for the invitation to address this, the 8th Rapid Prototyping Development and Evaluation Program's Biennial Meeting of Participants – BMP8.

I would like to acknowledge the presence of the members of the RPDE (I'll use the colloquial term - Rapid) Board and representatives of the Participant organisations, and many service and civilian members from Defence who have come along to this morning's event.

Ladies and gentlemen, as the Minister for Defence Personnel, Materiel and Science, I am regularly requested to deliver presentations to Defence and industry audiences such as this, and often the aim of my address will be to outline new Government policies or initiatives.

I have found on those occasions that there is always a key theme that underpins these announcements – and it is that Defence and industry are, and must be, inexorably linked. Without a strong relationship, our national security is weakened.

While sometimes this is an academic concept to the audience, I am pleased in this instance however, to be preaching to the converted.

It is worth examining the successes of the Rapid Program as a means to demonstrate what can be achieved when Defence and Industry work together to resolve issues.

However that is not enough, you should not rest on your laurels. I would like to invite you, or even challenge you, to take forward the lessons learned in

Rapid, to assist Defence to meet its goals and objectives as outlined in the Government's White Paper, the Defence Capability Plan the Mortimer reforms and the Strategic Reform Program.

The gathering is itself a significant event for a number of reasons. Outside of the major Defence conferences, the Rapid BMP represents perhaps the best opportunity for key industry representatives to meet with senior Defence officials on neutral territory, without the constraints imposed when Defence is undertaking capability acquisitions.

It is also a forum of stakeholders who have a shared interest. In this forum, companies large and small, universities and government institutions, all of whom have agreed to the same principles that govern the way they behave and interact, are given the opportunity to meet. And to talk openly with those who under other circumstances might contract them, be contracted by them or perhaps be their direct competitor.

I thought it might also be useful to explore RPDE's place and standing in both Defence and industry, to see if there are lessons for others. I am aware that other Government Departments and Agencies and also other nations' Defence Departments, have examined the utility of this program.

Rapid provides a unique legal, commercial and contractual framework that enables Defence to access some of the best minds in Australian industry and academia. This is in order to confront difficult and challenging issues that might otherwise have been left unattended.

Entire bodies of work can be scoped, contracted and delivered in weeks or a matter of months. This stands in contrast to some of our more lengthy acquisition projects.

Recent Events

Eighteen months ago I was invited to address BMP5. At that time there were 135 organisations that formed the RPDE participant base. Today, that number has grown to almost 200.

It is worth emphasising that these are not just two hundred organisations, but two hundred Australian organisations all of whom commit to undertaking R&D in this country. The importance of this difference cannot be over-emphasised.

It is worth understanding how much has happened since BMP5. When I spoke in March 2008, I was the newly appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Defence Procurement. At that event I forecast that there were significant challenges ahead for the Rudd Government and in particular for Defence.

We approached these challenges systematically, starting with a series of rigorous reviews into the status of existing projects that for one reason or another were struggling; we committed to a review of defence procurement, an audit of the defence budget and a new white paper.

Today many of those activities have been undertaken and Defence is in the process of positioning itself for the future. In particular, the White Paper, the Strategic Reform Program and the Government's response to the Mortimer review were released.

The RPDE Approach

Last month I addressed the Canberra-based members of AIDN. For those of you who were there, you will recall that I raised the Defence White Paper, the Defence Capability Plan and the Strategic Reform Program as key topics for discussion.

It is by no means a coincidence that I have again raised those issues today. The Rudd Government is committed to ensuring that the Australian Defence Force is equipped to face the challenges that lie ahead. At the crux of delivering against these undertakings there needs to be a better model than "business as usual".

Defence and industry must work together in a manner that demonstrates mutual respect and trust. Now, I suspect that many of you will have heard these words uttered before, and that equally, many of you will have had reason to question the commitment of those making the statements.

I am not here to pass judgment on past deeds but it is a fact that unless we can make it a reality, Defence will not realise the efficiencies that it requires to implement the Defence Capability Plan.

From my understanding of Rapid, and from the feedback that I have received from Defence and from Industry - the Rapid model may be one of the few clear examples where mutual respect and trust is not only spoken about, but actually forms a key foundation of the operating principles.

Industry find Rapid very useful as gives them a better understanding of Defence's intent and priorities. It also allows defence companies to rotate staff through the organisation to become more familiar with Defence.

The collegiate approach has resulted in the barriers between defence and industry, and large and small defence companies for that matter, breaking down. This is only possible because industry does not exploit the informality surrounding RPDE processes.

When you look at the attendance list for this meeting you quickly appreciate just how influential this group can be – both inside Defence and in industry. And importantly, we as a group have an obligation to continue to take the Rapid model forward. You will achieve that through your own corporate entities or, for those of you inside Defence, in the manner in which you undertake your future dealings with industry.

Innovation and Failure

At the AIDN meeting, I also spoke of the work that is underway to deliver a new defence industry policy and the many initiatives that have been or will be introduced to support the policy's implementation. Not surprisingly, Rapid was listed among those programs that will comprise the platform on which to build the new policy framework.

Many of the initiatives I listed share at their core the need to support innovation. Defence is not the only area across Government where innovation has been identified as a key driver – but it is still uncommon, even within my own portfolio, for people to identify concrete measures that foster innovation.

It was refreshing to see within the Rapid overview that innovation and more importantly, the need to drive innovation, is at the core of your business. It is true, I think to say, that in order to encourage innovative thinking you must be prepared to accept failure.

This is somewhat confronting, Ministers don't normally like being told that an acceptable outcome is failure! Even less do they like to suggest it!

It is only when you look into the nature of some of the tasks being undertaken by the RPDE Program and some of the unique approaches adopted to solve the problems that you can appreciate why this is so important.

For example, 27 years ago, the British warship HMS Sheffield was struck by an Exocet anti-ship missile during the Falklands War, causing significant casualties and subsequent loss of the ship.

One of the reasons why the attack on the Sheffield was successful was a vulnerability that required a reduction in the power output of the onboard electronic warfare suite so as to be able to communicate external to the ship. It was during this situation that the Exocet attack took place.

To ensure that a similar situation does not exist across the RAN as new and more capability electronic warfare systems are acquired, Rapid was tasked to find a technical solution.

Rapid had to accept that it might not be successful in resolving an issue which has remained unresolved for more than two and a half decades. However, the attitude of participants was that possible failure may still contribute to our sum on knowledge if lessons are learnt.

Early lessons from this effort did provide an immediate benefit to our ships operating in the Middle-East. As it has turned out, Rapid has gone one step better than anticipated and in recent months has trialled a number of potential solutions to the problem. This example reinforces the idea that the risk of failure should not be the reason behind not attempting to solve problems.

Another example worth highlighting was the role Rapid performed in developing an e-Health system for defence. A Rapid investigation was able to determine how to design and establish an e-Health system.

A practical e-Health solution is a challenge that companies and governments world-wide have invested billions of dollars in research over recent years with less than perfect outcomes. It seems extraordinary then, that in seven short months, and following an expenditure of less than half a million dollars, Rapid delivered a plan for the way forward for Defence

Rapid confirmed through its proof of concept activity that a number of mature and immediately available commercial-off-the-shelf software products can be integrated to form the basis of a comprehensive, efficient e-Health system.

In this instance we are talking about fiercely competitive companies working together under the Rapid model to deliver an outcome. I am told that they were not the most willing partners to start off with.

Nevertheless, by the end of the Task one company commented that they had learned so much about their own product in the process that they were unwilling to accept payment for their participation. Another commented that Rapid had managed to get their product to deliver performance that they were not even aware of.

So I wish to congratulate everyone involved with that particular project.

I was also interested to hear that Rapid rejects problems deemed to be too easy to solve. One immediately thinks that as an organisation Rapid is giving up on the potential for quick wins.

The reasoning behind this approach is quite simple but is one to which Defence, or Government more broadly might want to give some further thought. Rapid is of the view that if a problem is not so hard to solve, then simply tell industry what the problem is and there is a high probability that they will solve it.

As naive as that sounds it gets back to the principle of Defence and industry working cooperatively and demonstrating trust.

What that leaves for Rapid, then, is a set of questions that genuinely need input from collective wisdom and intellect, and the acceptance that even failing to solve the problem may deliver benefits.

Influence of RPDE

Open and early engagement with industry is at the heart of the Rapid operating procedures. I am interested in examining whether this engagement model is useful on other parts of defence.

There are indications that other nations are looking at this engagement model as well. The Canadian Department of National Defense has invested a significant amount of time and energy to examine the RPDE process. With their Project ACCORD, Canada hopes to replicate the success experienced in Australia.

Closer to home, the Western Australian Government Departments of Transport and Planning are adapting the Rapid model for the introduction of new technologies and systems. Further, the New South Wales Government is exploring how a Rapid-like entity could assist the State to overcome unresolved technology problems.

Conclusion

Rapid is approaching five years of operations. In that time it has delivered considerable benefit to Defence by way of solutions to problems that were otherwise being treated as simply too hard to solve.

It has also delivered for industry the benefits of getting good ideas in front of Defence decision makers as well as gaining a better appreciation of the problems that confront Defence. Especially in the area of introduction of new capabilities or upgrading existing capabilities.

Rapid's most important legacy to date is that it has shown what is achievable when you start the process in an atmosphere of close cooperation and collaboration

I would like to pass on my thanks to the team at Rapid and to you the Participants for your efforts. I look forward to reading and hearing more of your successes.

I thank you again for the opportunity to be here with you today, again welcome the new participants, and I wish you all the best for the coming year.

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