

Imperfect Releases: Andrew Hastie, War Crimes Reports and Australia in Afghanistan

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Theme: [Justice](#)

*If one were to get into the head of Australian government **MP Andrew Hastie**, a security tangle of woe would no doubt await. Having been a captain with the Special Air Services and having also served in Afghanistan, he has been none too thrilled by the publicity soldiers he served with have received. The report by New South Wales Court of Appeal Justice Paul Brereton has now been mandatory reading (or skimming) for political and military watchers. Known rather dully as the [Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force Afghanistan Inquiry Report](#), it makes the claim that 39 alleged murders were inflicted on non-combatants by Australian special service units when operating in Afghanistan.*

Of interest is where the report goes from here. A fair guess is that it will not venture too far into waters of reform. Hastie, for one, would have preferred it never to have been published, or at least not released in the “imperfect” way it was. He takes particular issue with the connected work of consultant Samantha Cromptoets, a sociologist commissioned by the Special Operations Commander of Australia (SOCAUST) to conduct a “cultural review” of the Special Operations Command in mid-2015.

In many ways, the work of Cromptoets, which is drawn upon and referenced heavily by the Brereton Inquiry itself, is more significant. It is less tightly hemmed by qualifications and speaks to the broader tactics and methods of Australia’s Special Forces. In her [January 2016 report](#), she refers to body count competitions and the use of the Joint Priority Effects List (JPEL). Euphemised for battle, the JPEL effectively constituted a “sanctioned kill list” with numbers that were massaged.

She notes methods of war common to counter-insurgency operations during the Cold War. From Algeria to Vietnam, those who often came off second best were villagers for the butchering. Slaughtered villagers were often designated “squirters” when fleeing the arrival of Special Forces via helicopter. Excuses were concocted for the generous bloodletting: the squirters “were running away from us to their weapons caches”.

Clearance operations would also be used after the initial massacre. The village would be cordoned off; the men and boys taken to guesthouses. They would be bound up. Torture would ensue for days. These men and boys would then be found dead, shot in the head or have their throats slit.

In one instance, Cromptoets notes soldiers of the SASR driving along a road and sighting two 14-year-old boys. The soldiers quickly concluded they had come across Taliban sympathisers. The boys were stopped and seized. Their throats were slit. Their bodies

were bagged and discarded in a river. Such occurrences were not infrequent; Special Force soldiers would commit such unsanctioned killings as a means of bonding, to “get a name for themselves”.

The death of the two Afghan boys has now become the stuff of diplomatic provocation. On November 30, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman **Zhao Lijian** [tweeted a mocked up image](#) of an Australian soldier ready to apply a blood soaked knife to the throat of an Afghan boy, holding a lamb. “Shocked by murder of Afghan civilians & prisoners by Australian soldiers. We strongly condemn such acts & call for holding them accountable.”

This was too much for Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison**, who took issue with its repugnance. But for Hastie, it went further. Australia, he claimed in his [speech](#) to fellow parliamentarians on December 3, had let its guard slip. His springboard was [an opinion piece](#) by Alan Jones, that most opinionated of broadcasters, less focused on the tweeted image than the prime minister’s reaction to it. “When will you,” bellowed Jones, “apologise for your language and that of your Generals that condemned all our men in Afghanistan, the best of the best, to the charge of criminal behaviour from a report you haven’t read and before any of them have access to the full weight of the law?”

For Jones, innocence had been impugned by Australia’s political and military leaders. China has simply furnished the Morrison government with suitable headlines of distraction, to “have them off the hook” even as Australia’s soldiers were being defamed.

Hastie’s speech advanced a few points. He spoke approvingly of Morrison’s response to Beijing. He then embraced a tactic of minimisation: the alleged atrocities were localised, select. Australia was “seeking to be honest and accountable for alleged wrongdoing by a small number of individuals entrusted to wear our flag.” He also attacked the work of Cromptvoets and the author herself. He grounds of contention were various: the appearance of the author on *60 Minutes* four days prior to the release of the Brereton Report; the leak of her report two weeks prior to the publication of the Inquiry’s findings; the decision to release the unredacted Cromptvoets report alongside the redacted Brereton Report.

“The Cromptvoets report detailed unproven rumours of Australian soldiers murdering Afghan children. It may have prompted the Brereton Report, but its evidentiary threshold was far lower. The Brereton report neither rules these rumours in or out. So why are they out in the open for our adversaries to use against us?” Doing so had “undermined public confidence in the process and allowed the People’s Republic of China to malign our troops.”

Hastie’s speech has a throbbing subtext: containment. Despite professing a belief in the rule of law and transparency, the overwhelming sense from the politician who chairs the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security is that the Inquiry should have been kept indoors. Such bloodied laundry should never have been aired. That, at the very least, would have avoided public discussions about the egregious methods of Australia’s elite warriors, and the decisions behind deploying them in the first place.

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