

OPINION

Increasing militarisation of police invites tragedy

By Michael Pembroke

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One issue raised by debate over the findings of the coronial inquiry into the Lindt Cafe siege, and Deborah Snow's important book on the subject, is whether the increasing militarisation of the police in Australia is desirable.

The new federal "call-out" powers, which lower the threshold for deployment of the military to help police deal with major terrorist and violent attacks, are welcome. This is a better development than greater militarisation of the police - a change that has been taking place incipiently in Australia, without informed discussion, political debate or public oversight. It is an unhealthy development.



Hostages run from the Lindt Cafe towards Special Operations police on December 16, 2014. *CREDIT: ANDREW MEARES*

The police have no incentive to say "no" to military assault rifles, flash bang grenades or armoured personnel carriers. But do we, as a society, really want to see our police so heavily armed, looking, and sometimes behaving, like an invasion force? Is it necessary or desirable? The more the police are given military-style weaponry, the more likely they are to use it. As the saying goes, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

There is a vital cultural and philosophical difference between the military and the police. The military is trained to use maximum force to kill and destroy the enemy; while the traditional role of the police is to protect the community, serve the public and keep the peace.

The warrior culture of the military is, or should be, anathema to the police. The excessive militarisation of the police - through more powerful arms and more sophisticated equipment - inevitably contributes to a mentality among some police officers that encourages them to think of the people they are supposed to serve as enemies. The tactics of the battlefield, and the use of unnecessarily aggressive and high-powered weapons, should have no place among our police forces. The mission of the police is not to wage war but to protect and safeguard.

Existing research establishes that excessive police militarisation is a problem with unforeseen and undesirable consequences. Those consequences include tragedy for civilians and police officers, escalation of the risk of violence and the undermining of personal rights and freedoms. It is an acute problem in the United States. I suspect that most Australians do not want to see the Americanisation of our police forces.

There are legitimate questions as to whether the militarisation of the police in Australia is in the best interests of our nation; and whether an appropriate response to the relatively few genuine domestic terror incidents is best left to the Australian Defence Force. Those questions deserve responsible public scrutiny.

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