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Stop the War Coalition
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Submission to:

Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation.

For:

Inquiry into the Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval of Overseas Service) Bill 2008 [No.2].

Stop the War Coalition

The Stop the War Coalition, Sydney, is a network of groups and individuals who work to end Australia's involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, to get all the troops out now and who call for justice for Palestine.

We have opposed the war and occupation of Afghanistan from the beginning as an illegal invasion of a sovereign territory and as most unlikely to achieve the publicly proclaimed aims of the offensive – the capture of Osama Bin Laden and the end of foreign terrorist activity in Afghanistan or anywhere else. We were right to be sceptical and we continue to oppose a military occupation as no solution to any of Afghanistan's manifest problems. The occupation is increasing the misery of the Afghan people and has spread insurgent activities against the foreign troops across the border into Pakistan, contributing to the de-stabilisation of the region.

We opposed the invasion and occupation of Iraq as a second, illegal invasion of a sovereign territory and in addition opposed the ostensible reason – to find Saddam Hussein's secret "weapons of mass destruction" – which we saw as a pretext. We witness the catastrophe the 2003 invasion has wreaked on the country with deep sadness but no surprise.

We call for complete withdrawal of all foreign troops from both countries and reparations to both for the damages inflicted on them by the war and occupation.

Submission

Australia's involvement in both of these military ventures has had extraordinarily limited discussion in the Parliament where the people's voices are supposed to be heard. There has been a lack of serious debate in Parliament about the decisions to join these wars. We note that the deliberations of the Australian Parliament have failed

- to discuss reasons for and against the decisions publicly;
- to put those decisions into the context of the American alliance;
- to admit that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that that reason for invasion was fraudulent;
- to consider alternatives for dealing with "international terrorism";
- to admit or discuss the disastrous consequences of the wars themselves for the peoples of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The consequence of the failure of the Parliament to discuss these matters is a lack of discussion in the public mainstream. If the politicians don't talk about it, then the media do not report nor comment to any extent. For instance while debate rages in the USA media and general public about the strategy to apply to the Afghanistan war, here there is barely a remark about the Australian strategy in the Parliament or out of it. Our media report the American debates, and ask what President Obama should do, here the Prime Minister says nothing beyond there will be no more Australian troops sent to Afghanistan, having increased them by 50% despite public opposition.

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It is extraordinarily difficult to raise public debate about such serious questions despite the disquiet about them reported in opinion polls. Nonetheless the majority of people were opposed to the invasion of Iraq and now a narrow majority oppose the continued involvement in the war on Afghanistan. This opposition is not reflected in parliamentary debate or other political commentary in the mass media. Stop the War Coalition sees this as an unacceptable contradiction in our democracy.

We therefore welcome and support Senator Scott Ludlum's proposed legislation as an attempt to address this contradiction. It is our hope that by obliging the government to put its case for committing Australian troops to a foreign war to the Parliament, we may get more credible reasons than platitudes about the war on terrorism which are then dutifully repeated by the media. It may then be possible to have a realistic and honest discussion about involvement in a war which assesses the needs for maintaining the alliance with the USA and its supposed benefits, against the negative consequences of civilian deaths and destruction of civilian society, and perceived loss of Australian diplomatic independence and reputation.

Likewise we support the proposal in the Bill to require the government to account to the Parliament at regular intervals for the status of the troop deployment. We particularly applaud the inclusion of the provision of reporting on efforts to resolve the situation requiring the deployment, and the requirement to explain why the deployment should not be terminated. These provisions would help guard against "mission creep" and focus the Parliament's attention on resolution of situations of war. It would enable the public to make clear to their Parliamentary representatives their views as circumstances change and the public's support changes with it. It is after all the sons and daughters of the voters who go to war and run the risks, not the government ministers nor the MPs, nor for the most part any of their children.

The question of war is a serious one. Decisions to declare war should surely be taken with more discussion and debate than that which attends the annual Budget. The onus ought to be on the government and the opposition to explain why the Parliament should not make the decision, and why it should be left in the hands of the Prime Minister.

Anne Picot

for

Stop the War Coalition Sydney