

Marrickville Peace Group

W: www.marrickvillepeacegroup.org

Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee,
on the matter of
the Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval Overseas Service) Bill 2020

The Marrickville Peace Group (MPG) is firmly of the view that any decision involving the deployment of Australian Defence Forces to engage in military action overseas should be taken by Parliament as a whole, rather than by the Prime Minister and the National Security Committee.

Accordingly, MPG is in full support of the Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval Overseas Service) Bill 2020, sponsored by Senator Jordan Steele-John. It urges the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee to recommend the Bill for debate in the Senate.

There have been attempts to introduce legislation of this type, over many years.

In 2009, members of MPG travelled to Canberra to discuss such legislation with then Senator Scott Ludlam. A submission to the committee was prepared at that time and is appended.

MPG is aware of and supports the activities of ‘Australians for War Powers Reform’ (AWPR), lead by Mr Paul Barratt AO, until his recent decease. Amongst many posts that he filled as a senior bureaucrat, Mr Barratt served as Secretary for Defence 1998-99. His reputation as a clear-thinking person, who made an extraordinary contribution to Australia has been widely acknowledged. He is quoted as saying “Ordinary Australians want their local MPs and Senators to oversee this life and death decision, not just the Prime Minister and a few ministers behind closed doors,” There would be no more fitting recognition of his life’s work than having the Bill progress in the legislative process by being placed before the Senate.

MPG is aware that, in a nationwide Roy Morgan opinion poll of 1052 people, released in November 2020, 83.3% of respondents wanted Parliament to decide whether our troops are sent into armed conflict abroad. Only 16.7% said that they favour the current system (whereby The Prime Minister and the executive alone decide if Australia goes to war). In a democracy such as Australia’s, these numbers should be sufficient to persuade the committee that ‘War Powers Reform’ is a matter worthy of attention at the highest level.

Events since 2009 have only served to confirm MPG’s views, as several decisions, of great military significance, have been taken without parliamentary oversight. For example:- the decision to establish the US Marine rotational Force (Darwin), made in 2011; the decision to engage in military action in Syria (2015), and the announcement in September that Australia is to enter the new ‘AUKUS’ arrangements. All of these decisions illustrate the same pattern – of serious, strategic decisions being made by a small coterie of government ministers, without consulting the people’s representatives in the parliament. They have been

undemocratic and, in the view of many, contrary to the national interest. Indeed, there is no way to test the true ‘national interest’ without reference to the nation’s parliament.

In this connection, Alison Broinowski, currently the acting president of AWPR, has written “AUKUS makes Australia more than ever a proxy target which China could attack to send a warning to the US. Malcolm Fraser told us in 2014, the US alliance endangers Australia more than it defends us. Worst of all, this partnership was devised in secret, without consultation with Australian, British, or American political representatives, let alone with any of our neighbours. There has never been a better time to change the war powers which allow governments to bypass parliaments and endanger us all.” MPG agrees.

As is mentioned in MPG’s 2009 submission, events that most glaringly illustrate the folly of taking Australia to war without prior parliamentary debate, were the decisions to go to war in Afghanistan in 2001 and to join the invasion of Iraq in 2003. These decisions led to long and costly engagements. The war in Afghanistan lasted 20 years and resulted in an eventual defeat and retreat. The Iraq war led to the emergence of ISIS. In the case of Iraq, had a less precipitate decision been made and had there been parliamentary debate, it is possible that the then unresolved question of whether or not Iraq was, in fact, manufacturing Weapons of Mass Destruction might have prevented or delayed Australia’s participation in that particular war. As things stand, both decisions were disastrous, both for the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq and for Australia’s international reputation. With the benefit of hindsight, the folly of going to war without first consulting the Australian people, through well-established democratic process, should be abundantly clear.

It is time for a change. The matter is too serious to be left as it is.

Marrickville Peace Group recommends that the Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval Overseas Service) Bill 2020, sponsored by Seantor Jordan Steele-John, be debated in the Senate.

Marrickville Peace Group
October 14, 2021

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Appendix

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Marrickville, NSW, 2204.

About Marrickville Peace Group

The Group first came into being in late 2002, during a period in which the Australian public was being told by its leaders that Iraq presented an imminent threat to the safety of every Western nation.

We came together in dismay at the prospect of Australia engaging in armed conflict. We remain of the opinion that war serves no useful purpose whatsoever for any of the parties involved.

Our view is that going to war is such a dreadful undertaking that it should only happen as an absolutely last resort. Without question, it is a matter of such gravity that it should be debated at every level before any decision is taken.

We found it outrageous that the decision to join in the invasion of Iraq was made without any parliamentary debate. It was very clear to us that this was a matter with ramifications for Australia reaching far into the future.

Submission regarding Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval of Overseas Service) Bill 2008 [No. 2]

Events have shown that the public was deceived about the threat that Iraq presented and we remain of the view that there was no valid reason for the attack that Australia joined. The consequences of that decision have been to the nation's detriment.

The events surrounding the invasion of Iraq are vivid illustration of the foolishness of taking a decision about engaging in warfare without proper consultation and debate.

The Marrickville Peace Group is firmly in favour of the Defence Amendment (Parliamentary Approval of Overseas Service) Bill 2008 [No. 2], proposed by Senator Scott Ludlam and presently under consideration by the Committee.

We agree that Australia's armed forces should not be sent overseas to engage in warlike action without the approval of both Houses of Parliament. It is an utterly sensible proposition, from every angle.

- In a Democracy, there should always be proper debate before any serious decision is taken.
- This principle should apply most strongly in situations involving the use of armed force, when the lives of young men and women will be at risk.
- The people's representatives should carefully consider the reasons for and against any decision to commit Australian troops to action overseas, for causes proposed by the Executive, so as to ensure that the people understand and support that commitment beforehand.
- The Bill does not take away powers that might be needed in an emergency.

- The Bill protects the nation from the consequences of a rash or precipitate decision such as the one we saw in the invasion of Iraq.

We believe that the present is a most appropriate time for legislative moves to reduce the risk of war. The election of President Obama in the United States and his recent Nobel Peace Prize are expressions of a strong desire for peace everywhere.

If the Bill is enacted, Australia will have taken a positive step towards a more peaceful world.

Marrickville Peace Group.
15 October 2009.