SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFAIRS DEFENCE AND TRADE INQUIRY ON THE DEFENCE AMENDMENT (PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL OF OVERSEAS SERVICE) BILL 2008

WAR POWERS AND THE AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY

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Over the past sixty years Australia has committed forces to several conflicts, ranging from the Korean War to the current operations in Afghanistan. Some of these commitments were notably wise: the Korean War (which gained us the ANZUS alliance as well as stabilising the Korean Peninsula); the Malayan Emergency (which enabled a strong, independent, non-Communist country to emerge and contribute strongly to our region); and resistance to Indonesia's Confrontation of Malaysia (which put an end to Soekarno's chauvinism and disruption of our region). Various Australian governments also chose, wisely in my view, to contribute forces when called upon by the UN to do so, such as to peacekeeping missions in Cambodia, Africa and the Middle East. Australia was also marginally involved in the first Gulf War of 1991. However in the cases of the remaining conflicts, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War, Australian involvement has been notably unwise. Participation in these conflicts has been much more protracted than initially envisaged. They have incurred significant numbers of deaths, disabilities, woundings and sickness for the Australians participating. They have been much more expensive in material terms than originally believed, and their consequences for the countries in which they have been fought have been counterproductive.

In the case of the Vietnam War, the unfavourable outcome was largely neutralised by China's change of course in the 1970s to become an economic partner of the West and a stronger rival of the Soviet Union. In the case of the Iraq War, the very nature of President Bush's commitment gained millions of new Islamic radical enemies for the United States, and strengthened anti-American sentiment across the globe. While removing Saddam Hussein was a step forward, it was done with scant appreciation of the consequences: a protracted and costly war for the intervenors and a bloody, polarising civil conflict for the Iraqis themselves. Similarly removal of the Taliban from government in Afghanistan has not produced peace in that country. War, at high human and material costs, continues in Afghanistan and may do so for many years. In the meantime the precious military and financial resources of the United States and its allies are consumed in these conflicts and are not available to meet other contingencies such as the deterioration of the situation

in Pakistan and the growth of al Qaeda and other such groups across the Islamic world. Our enemies perceive our over-commitment and proclaim it triumphantly on their web sites. They do not think they are losing the struggle.

Military power has become an increasingly precious commodity for liberal western states because of the reluctance of their governments and electors to impose compulsory military service on their young people. While this added freedom is a good thing in many ways, it does create a particular need for governments and legislatures to be especially careful as to what conflicts their armed forces are committed. Governments must also weigh the impact of those commitments on their armed forces' own ability to recruit and retain the sort of outstanding young men and women who are essential to their effectiveness and credibility.

Another reason for great care in deciding whether or not to enter a conflict is the need to have good prospects of success. History shows us that the consequences of lost wars are usually very unpleasant indeed for those on the losing side. The case of Iraq in 2003 is a particularly salutary example. Because the Bush Administration, impelled largely by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney, had no understanding of the consequences that would follow from the toppling of Saddam, it did not prepare to meet the chaos that ensued. The result was that the United States and its allies have become trapped in a long-running insurgency with no clear sign of success apparent after over six years. US troops are being withdrawn but the prospect of a more savage internal conflict still looms over Iraq.

This outcome has exposed a serious weakness of the United States' armed forces, namely their lack of expertise in the conduct of counter-insurgency operations. Their firepower and ability to inflict death and destruction in an occupied territory are formidable, but these apparent strengths are often counter-productive in the insurgency setting. In addition United States (and many other allied) forces have to surmount major cultural, linguistic and social obstacles in coming out from behind their armour and weapons as military occupiers, to become trusted helpers, even friends, of the local people where they are stationed. One of the few good results of the chaos and shambles into which US operations in Iraq descended after the fall of Saddam has been an awareness by some of the most intelligent of US military officers that it was time to re-develop counter-insurgency capabilities that had been neglected since the Vietnam War thirty years ago. I take some pride in this development as several of the leading identities in this wave of new military thinkers and leaders were my doctoral students at Oxford in the 1980s and 90s.

However the culture of the US Army is not easy to change, and it is still not clear to me that enough US, and allied, personnel have mastered the new approach for it to succeed. Hence allies such as Australia need to look very carefully at the prospects for success of future operations led by the United States before agreeing to take part.

I mention these deficiencies in American military capacities to emphasise the point that warfare in the 21st century has become increasingly complex.

Therefore any Australian decision to take part in an allied operation needs to be very carefully considered. The decision should be based on a broad range of analysis and expertise, and, especially if it should be in the affirmative, the undertaking of a new military commitment needs the support of the Parliament as a whole.

In the past, especially in the cases of the Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the decision to commit forces was taken by a small group of ministers, in which the Prime Minister played a dominant role. In such a small group, inhibitions based on concerns about the major ally's capacity to fight effectively and win within a period of a year or two (if perceived at all) can be easily swept aside by the desire of the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister or the Cabinet at large to remain close to whoever is the US President at the time of deciding. Also in this system of decision-making, broader issues such as the morality of the commitment, which was clearly a major public issue in the cases of Vietnam and Iraq, are relatively easy for the Government to ignore or set to one side. The small group setting also makes it easier to believe faulty intelligence reports, or even to dismiss them where they are inconvenient for the government's preferred policy. Australia's decisions on commitment to any of these three conflicts would almost certainly have been improved had the proposal been debated in both Houses of the Parliament.

Given that the nature of international conflict has changed during the past sixty years from major confrontations on the lines of the two world wars to dealing with insurgencies, the need for deep and wide consideration and discussion of all the relevant factors is all the stronger. Given the continuing unsatisfactory situation in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the rapid growth of radical cells or movements of young Islamists who are willing to commit suicide in order to kill an enemy or two, Iran's steady progress towards building nuclear weapons, and high tensions between Israel and its more radical opponents (Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran), we must be even more careful than we have been in the past. The West could continue to provoke a situation very much to its own detriment which would lead, for example, to suicide attacks on principal cities by extremists armed with weapons of mass destruction. The international market in hydrocarbons could be severely disrupted with dire consequences for all energy users. The risks of wider conflagrations and calamities are growing, not decreasing, and facing them effectively calls for very fine and well-informed strategic judgement on the parts of national leaders, including all Members of Parliament.

Thus I support the proposed amendment to the Defence Act. A wider Parliamentary debate on the complex issues of going to war in the 21st Century would be a major improvement on the current system. No longer should we tolerate a situation whereby a few political leaders, with or without appropriate advice, can entangle us in more unsuccessful conflicts which lead to the long term deterioration of our own security. We need to use our resources much more cleverly and productively, and also it would not hurt to hear from real experts in the areas and issues under discussion before the final decision is taken. A wider Parliamentary debate could lead to wider national consultation, resulting in much better decisions on war and peace.

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I have written these thoughts on the basis of a professional lifetime of activity in the field of international security. From 1955 to 1968 I served in the Australian Army, including a year in Vietnam as an infantry officer. Moving into academia in 1968 I became the Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University in 1971, and while in that position contributed to several earlier hearings of this Committee. In 1982 I moved to London as Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and after five years there I was appointed to the Chichele Professorship of the History of War and a Fellowship of All Souls College, in the University of Oxford. On retiring from Oxford and returning to Australia I was the first Chairman of the Council of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2000-2005. Since 2003 I have been a Director of the Lowy Institute for International Policy. After serving as the Planning Director of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, 2006-07, I became the chairman of the Centre's International Academic Advisory Board. Throughout the past forty years I have continued to think, write and speak on international security issues, advise governments, organise research centres and projects, and teach a wide array of talented young men and women from around the world and who are now engaged in politics, the armed services, government service, business, journalism and academia. They are now among my educators.

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