

Senate, Monday 23 September 2002

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Joint: Report

Senator FERGUSON (South Australia) (3.48 p.m.) —I present the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Review of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence Annual Reports, 2000-2001*, together with the Hansard record of proceedings and submissions received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Senator FERGUSON —I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Senator FERGUSON —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

I am pleased to present this report on behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Not only is it our first report in this parliament; it is the result of the first general review by the committee of annual reports from the government agencies within its area of interest. Traditionally, Senate committees, not joint committees, have conducted general annual report reviews. We decided to review the annual reports from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID, Austrade and the Department of Defence for two main reasons: firstly, to make an active contribution to the processes by which the parliament holds the executive and its agencies to account; and, secondly, to seek status reports on various policy and operational issues outlined in the annual reports. At a practical level, it has allowed committee members from the House of Representatives to participate in an activity similar to that routinely available to senators.

The review involved two public hearings: one conducted by our Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, the other by our Defence Subcommittee. Many of the issues raised at these hearings were also of interest to our Trade Subcommittee and Human Rights Subcommittee. This report contains a summary of the key issues discussed at the hearings. The foreign affairs and trade chapter of the report focuses on three themes: events in the Middle East and South America following the committee's reports on these regions in the last parliament; Australia's relations with some of the countries in north and south Asia; and Australia's relations with our near neighbours including Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and the developing nations of the south-west Pacific.

The scope of the defence chapter of the report is similarly broad. As well as commenting generally on Defence's performance in resourcing, management and acquisition, we consider, in some detail, the provision of support to Defence Force personnel and their families following operational deployment and in preparation for the transition from military service to civilian life. These issues are especially relevant given the high level of operational tempo currently being experienced and the importance of retaining experienced and skilled personnel. Considerable effort is devoted to the provision of these services in the Defence Force and, over time, their breadth and quality has improved. There is scope, however, for further improvements to be made in the availability and effectiveness of transition services. We have made a series of recommendations to this end. For example, we have called on Defence: to ensure that all Defence Force personnel returning from operational deployments are required to complete two-week adjustment or 'decompression' periods at work before undertaking recreational leave; and to make job placement services available to all Defence Force moving from military service to civilian life. With the exception of our recommendations on transitional management, the one-off nature of the hearings and the general absence of supporting written evidence means that we have not sought to undertake a

full analysis of every issue raised at the hearings and mentioned in the report. Nonetheless, from our perspective, the review has been very useful and I expect that annual report reviews will become a regular part of the committee's work program.

Question agreed to.