

Senate, Wednesday 19 September 2001

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

Senator CALVERT (Tasmania) (5.38 p.m.) —On behalf of Senator Ferguson, I present the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade entitled *Australia's relations with the Middle East*, together with the Hansard record of the committee's proceedings and submissions received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Senator CALVERT —by leave—I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

I seek leave to incorporate Senator Ferguson's tabling statement in Hansard.

Leave granted.

The statement read as follows—

Almost 20 years have elapsed since the Committee's last comprehensive review of the relationship between Australia and the Middle East region, which culminated in a report entitled *The Gulf and Australia*, presented in 1982. However, the passage of time has certainly not diminished the Committee's interest in that part of the world.

In February 2000, the Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to the Committee the matter of Australia's relations with the Middle East. The terms of reference were particularly wide-ranging, and required the Committee to consider all major aspects of the political, strategic, economic, social and cultural links between Australia and the Middle East region, which includes the states surrounding the Persian Gulf.

Generated principally by the on-going Arab-Israeli conflict and the virtual collapse of negotiations between the Palestinian leadership and Israel, tensions in the Middle East continue to have international repercussions. Together with other responsible members of the international community, Australia has viewed with concern the escalation of violence and the relentless cycle of revenge, particularly in the 'Occupied Territories' and very recently in Israel.

When the Committee concluded its deliberations in August, no-one could have foreseen the enormity of the worst terrorist attack in history—against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—on 11 September. It is still difficult to come to terms with the horror and scale of the attack and the huge loss of innocent lives. While the Committee's observations in Chapter 4 on international terrorism and other forms of extreme political action have been completely overshadowed by last week's events, the Committee strongly reiterates its total condemnation of terrorism in all its forms. Australia supports all efforts by the international community to prevent acts of terrorism everywhere and to bring to justice those responsible for perpetrating such hideous crimes.

Given the tensions prevailing in many parts of the Middle East, it would be surprising if members of the various communities in Australia did not hold strong views about the events unfolding in the region.

While acknowledging the strong emotions which have been generated by the on-going and escalating regional disputes, the Committee has sought to achieve a balance in assessing the views presented in submissions and other evidence to the inquiry. In a region where complex and highly sensitive issues are in dispute, there is no single cause which is right and just above all others. The various Middle Eastern communities in Australia cannot expect unqualified support for their particular points of view, only the opportunity to express and to explain them.

The strategic importance of the Middle East to the world, and to Australia, scarcely needs to be stated. A stable Middle East is important to Australia and, within the limits of Australia's

influence, promotion of regional security is a primary concern. Australia has clear interests in combating the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in reducing possible threats to lines of communication between Europe and East Asia, and in seeing the continued flow of oil essential to many of our trading partners as well as to Australia itself.

The two-way trade and investment relationship is important to Australia, and it has therefore warranted significant attention in the Committee's latest report. Against the background of Australia's established commercial interests in the Middle East, the Committee has made several recommendations that would, we believe, result in increased exports from Australia. A radical new approach is needed, however, to lift Australia's disappointing share of total imports to the Middle East. Among other suggestions, the Committee has recommended the establishment of a Business Advisory Group to coordinate an effective 'Team Australia' approach, with a sharp trade focus.

Major sections of the report have also been devoted to examining the following key issues:

- Promotion and protection of human rights in the region
- Migration from the Middle East, and enhancement of the social and cultural links between Australia and the region
- Australia's response to asylum-seekers, particularly from the Middle East.

The Committee has made a number of recommendations designed to increase the effectiveness of Australia's contribution in all these areas.

The report concludes with a detailed discussion of Australia's overseas aid program to the Middle East, and suggests ways in which it might be improved. The long-standing priorities of supporting the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency and the projects managed by Australian and local non-government organisations continue to be important. In addition, the Committee has recommended that Australia's aid program for the Middle East include a forward commitment of at least \$10 million per annum in non-food aid to the region.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the members of the Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee for their commitment and contribution over many months to the completion of this review. My thanks are also extended to the secretariat staff who provided excellent research, procedural and administrative support for the Committee both during the inquiry and in the production of this comprehensive report.

I commend the report to the Senate.

Senator CALVERT —I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.