

Senate, Monday 20 October 1997

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Joint: Reports

Senator MacGIBBON (Queensland)(4.32 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the following reports of the committee, together with minutes of proceedings: *Sharpening the focus , a report on a seminar on the Simons committee report, 11 July 1997, Canberra*, and *From empire to partnership , a report on a seminar on the Commonwealth of Nations, 20 August 1997, Canberra*. I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the reports.
Leave granted.

Senator MacGIBBON —I move:

That the Senate take note of the reports.

I have great pleasure today in tabling two reports by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Both of these reports are the result of seminars held by the joint standing committee on these specific topics over the winter period.

The seminars are a very useful way to look at a foreign policy or defence issue in a timely fashion. While it certainly does not permit the same level of detailed scrutiny as a full inquiry, the seminar process does allow the committee to gather together a diverse range of individuals and groups to discuss a particular issue. The dialogue between all of the participants is extremely constructive, and one of the major benefits at each of the seminars was the interchange of ideas between people from quite different backgrounds and points of view. The committee has held a number of these seminars since July 1996, and we have had very considerable positive feedback on the format and the processes they follow.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all of the government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, business representatives, academics, members of the NGO community, members of parliament and members of the general community who attended these seminars and contributed so much to their success. My thanks go also to those members of the joint standing committee who participated in these seminars. I would like to make some brief comments about each of the reports today and hopefully expand on these in the main committee at a future date.

The first seminar during the recent winter break dealt with a review of the Australian aid program. The seminar was held at the request of the Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr Downer), who asked the committee to conduct a seminar on the report of a review committee chaired by Mr Paul Simons. That report was released in early May and the minister undertook that there would be a period of wide public consultation before the report was considered by government. Our seminar was one of a number of seminars and conferences held around the country dealing with aspects of the Simons report.

The committee was very pleased to have all of the members of the Simons committee present at the seminar—Paul Simons, Gaye Hart and Cliff Walsh—and also the Director-General of AusAID, Trevor Kanaley, and a significant number of his staff. We were also pleased that the head of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, Mr James Michel, who was visiting Australia at the time, was able to join us for some of the discussions.

The Simons review is the first major review of the development assistance program since the Jackson report of the early 1980s. It was the general feeling that reviews of this kind need to be done somewhat more regularly—a 13-year gap is too great. One of the recommendations of the Simons committee endorsed by the joint standing committee was for the establishment of an advisory board to assist AusAID management in the direction of the development assistance program. Hopefully, with such input, the process of finetuning the aid program will be simplified for all involved.

The seminar did not set out to cover all aspects of the Simons report. Anyone who has examined that report will know that it is an extremely comprehensive examination of the aid program. However, the seminar did look at issues such as overseas trends in development assistance; refocusing the aid program, taking into account geographic and sectoral factors; soft loans and concessional financing; the question of whether Australian aid should be untied; and the whole issue of NGOs and the Australian aid program.

The Simons committee's report carries the title, *One clear objective: poverty reduction through sustainable development*. The joint committee supports the concept that the prime motivation for a development assistance program is humanitarian. The committee did have some concerns, however, that too narrow a definition of poverty may be adopted.

Development assistance encompasses a range of activities designed to improve the standard of living of people in developing countries whether through infrastructure projects, educational activities, assistance to micro enterprises as well as immediate assistance to those suffering from hunger and homelessness. The committee agrees that assistance should be through sustainable development activities. The committee also acknowledges that other policy objectives may be met through the aid program without detracting from its fundamental purpose.

The joint standing committee has made 15 recommendations in all regarding the Simons review and the general running of the aid program. The committee remains concerned about the obvious resource implications for AusAID—both staffing and budgetary—should all of the recommendations of the Simons review be instituted. This will obviously be a matter of great importance for the government at this time of budgetary restrictions, but it will have to be addressed if Australia is to maximise the impact of its aid budget.

The second report being tabled today concerns the Commonwealth of Nations and, given the imminent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh, it is particularly relevant and timely. The committee was interested in examining whether the Commonwealth remains relevant in the post-Cold War period, and indeed whether it is of even more relevance given the momentous changes in the international arena that have occurred over the last decade. The Commonwealth has changed in many ways since the days when it was the British Commonwealth, and it was quickly apparent to the committee that a number of misconceptions still exist about its organisation.

The seminar covered topics such as the role of CHOGM and other meetings; public perceptions of the Commonwealth; the 'unofficial Commonwealth', that is, the vast number of non-government organisations that exist among Commonwealth countries; the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; trade and investment issues; and human rights and the Commonwealth. Time does not permit me to go into any depth on these issues here today, but I would recommend the report and the transcript of the seminar to all who have an interest in the Commonwealth and the remarkably diverse benefits that flow from it to Australia.

I would like to conclude my remarks today by once again thanking all who gave of their time to participate in these seminars. The committee found the seminar process to be a most useful means of exploring issues in a comparatively short time frame and believes the reports contain a number of issues that merit consideration by government. I commend the two reports to the Senate.

Question resolved in the affirmative.