

**House of Representatives, Monday 25 June 2001**

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

**Mr HOLLIS** (Throsby) (12.50 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report, incorporating dissenting reports, entitled *Australia's role in United Nations Reform*, together with evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

**Mr HOLLIS** —As deputy chairman of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report on Australia's role in United Nations reform. During the inquiry, the committee received 150 submissions and 65 exhibits, and it held eight days of public hearings within Australia. It also had extensive discussions with the UN secretariat in New York and an inspection of the peace operation in East Timor, and held discussions with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan.

I must say that being given five minutes to speak on the tabling of such an important report in some respects makes a mockery of the work people put in and the committee system itself. Those who compiled the report put many hours into this work. I must say also that the Labor members of the committee feel extremely frustrated at the final outcome of the report. We worked very hard to get a consensus report, and so were not as critical of Australia's role—especially in treaty making processes, most notably in regard to human rights—as we would have been had we known earlier that many members of the government would put in a partisan dissenting report.

I have always thought that committees of this parliament took and evaluated the evidence and made recommendations to the parliament. It is pointless if recommendations are only going to follow party political lines. You might as well not have any reports at all and just have party committees. I have worked on many committee reports both in government and in opposition where the report either made a recommendation that was not in line with current government policy or even challenged government policy. I point, for example, to the Ships of Shame report and indeed continuing reports from the House of Representatives Committee on Communications, Transport and the Arts such as *Tracking Australia* which have made strong recommendations and, indeed, been critical of government policy regardless of the government. It is always up to the government of the day to accept or reject the committee's recommendations. I believe pressure has been put on government members not to agree with committee recommendation 19. I am not saying that the Minister for Foreign Affairs was actually shown the report, but I am convinced that he knew of this recommendation and that pressure was brought to bear on government members of the committee. Perhaps also, given another minister's reaction to a committee report last week, government members did not wish to be personally abused and found it easier not to upset a minister.

Regarding the dissents to this report, for the most part they have been made by members of the committee who did not participate in any of the inquiry's proceedings. The credibility of their views must be questioned, as these members listened to none of the evidence, attended none of the private discussions of the committee on the issues as the inquiry progressed, did not visit New York to take part in the discussions with the UN secretariat and did not contribute to the framing of the final report. Members took evidence from all over Australia and in New York. We evaluated that evidence and used it to produce a report which I feel reflects what we were told and what those few participating members actually felt.

Regarding Senator Harradine's long dissenting report, at least Senator Harradine did attend the drafting stages of the report and put most of this to the committee but the committee did not agree with it. Most of the senator's information on UNFPA was taken from outdated and selective reports. Frankly, today one can go to a web site and get any quote or report to support their own particular prejudice. Much of this report is outside our areas of inquiry.

It is interesting that the dissenting report on CEDAW was signed by 12 members of the government but, apart from Senator Ferguson and the member for Fadden, David Jull, the other signatories did not attend any hearings, did not see the evidence and did not evaluate it. It is also interesting that in their dissenting report they favourably quote the Australian foreign minister regarding Australia's human rights record. They make mention of the political nature of CEDAW and in fact, in additional comments, Senator Chapman speaks of the demonstrated ideological nature of CEDAW. There is an irony in the fact that the dissenters complain about the UN committee being ideologically driven in the remarks they make when most of the members dissenting now have written their dissent without having heard any of the evidence or attending any of the meetings of this inquiry. Some would claim their dissent is as ideologically driven as the committees they complain about.

I wish to pay special tribute to the secretariat staff: Ms Margaret Swieringa; the research officer, Mr Jon Bonnar; the administrative officer, Ms Lesley Cowan; and the parliamentary intern, Ms Georgina Ramsay. They worked under very trying conditions to help bring this report to fruition. It is a pity that this report, which could have been a start to rebuilding Australia's reputation at the UN and could have made the UN better known within Australia, will not have the positive impact it could have had. (Time expired)

**Mr JULL** (Fadden) (12.55 p.m.) —I would like to associate myself with the tabling of the report, *Australia's role in United Nations Reform*. Despite what we have just heard—and in some respects I can understand some of the points that the member has made—I still believe that this will be one of the most significant reports ever made by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. It was a committee very dedicated to the task. It was a committee that showed that particular commitment through the fact that members of the committee did go to the United Nations, they did go to New York and they did pay for the trip out of their own resources. It was not a parliamentary committee going overseas as such. I think there was a sense of dedication to the enormity of the task that we were facing that made some of us realise that, if we were going to make a real contribution to Australia's role in the future of the United Nations, we had to go and understand it.

The chairman and the deputy chairman of the joint committee were both in New York as Australia's parliamentary advisers to the General Assembly of the United Nations. A number of us had also experienced that particular position. I myself was there in 1995, and I think that the authenticity of so much of this report goes back to the fact that so many of the members of that committee had actually worked in the United Nations and had actually worked in that system. Therefore, I think the report is valuable and I think it will very much be the subject of great study and great debate not only in Australia but overseas. I remember that when Kofi Annan himself appeared before the committee—and that was in itself a bit of a coup—he made the comment that he was particularly looking forward to the report. I believe that that was so not only because it is probably one of the few such parliamentary inquiries that have been held but because of Australia's position on the United Nations.

The honourable member for Fairfax, in speaking to his IPU report earlier in the day, made reference to the fact that at the IPU Australia boxes very much above its weight. I think a similar situation exists in the United Nations. One of the things that came through to the committee was the regard in which Australia is held within the UN and the UN organisations and the fact that there seem to be so many Australians in such important positions within the United Nations structure. I know that, during my time at the United Nations in 1995, it was very much an Australian effort that reviewed and reconstructed the system of accounts within the United Nations. Whether or not you are looking at aid relief or whether or not you are looking at the peacekeeping operations, wherever you go there seem to be Australians in dominant positions within the United Nations. The reason for that is manifold but, most importantly, I think Australia is regarded within the United Nations as being very much an honest broker. Indeed, that was the experience that I had. We are not a super power but we are a power that is not

without influence in the world. We are regarded as being quite transparent in our analyses of particular situations. That regard came through to me quite often as I sat in that General Assembly chamber. People from a most diverse range of countries used to come up to the Australian delegation to find out just which way we were thinking or which way we were going to vote on a particular issue. To me, that said volumes about the contribution that we have made. That is why I think this report is going to be so important.

I would like to make reference very briefly—because the time available is very brief—to some of the misconceptions that are held about the United Nations and its operation within Australia. This indeed came through in some of the evidence and some of the submissions that were put to our committee. If this report does nothing else, I hope it knocks on the head some of these thoughts of what the United Nations is all about. The United Nations is not a world government. It does not have the capacity to be a world government. The United Nations is very much an extension of independent states who are trying to work together for the betterment of the world. While we hear so much about what the United Nations is supposed to do and what it is not supposed to do, I would commend to those people who are critical of it to have a look at some of the work of the United Nations agencies. Organisations such as the World Health Organisation, ICAO and UNICEF make tremendous contributions and would, I think, be regarded throughout the community as a vital part of our international connections. The recommendations in this report make due reference to the fact that we need to make sure that Australians are absolutely aware of what the United Nations is all about and of what our commitments and obligations are, and therefore I hope this report will be widely read. (Time expired)

**Mr PRICE** (Chifley) (1.01 p.m.) —I rise to support the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade report *Australia's role in United Nations Reform*. The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade seems to be setting all sorts of records. Last week we had the tabling by the Human Rights Subcommittee of the report into detention centres. I have no need to remind you of the outburst of the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs at a press conference about that. Today we have the United Nations report being tabled—and, again, an extraordinary event. Firstly, the report is endorsed by the main committee and then those who had supported it lodged a dissenting report. I have never before seen anything like this. Clearly, the government is, I regret to say, wanting to interfere in the work of the committee and is reflecting itself as a government out of control. Mention has been made in one of the dissenting reports to recommendation 19. The recommendation as printed reads:

... a majority of the committee recommends that the Australian Government proceed with the ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

When I read that recommendation as printed, I cannot recall the words 'a majority' being in that recommendation as agreed to. It was clear that Senator Harradine was going to provide a dissenting report, but the words 'a majority', as I recall, were just not what was agreed to. Perhaps I am wrong, but this is the nub of the issue: during the report consideration all members other than Senator Harradine agreed to the report, but when the report was to be tabled, when members on the Labor side compromised—as we do in a committee procedure, with a bit of give and take to get a unanimous or a worthwhile report—suddenly a dissent was lodged by all but four of the government members. This is absolutely extraordinary.

I could not lessen my concern about the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. I do not understand how people in this parliament could not want to be associated with that proposition. I do not find it objectionable that women should be able to appeal to a United Nations committee about discrimination that they may suffer in Australia. As I say, I am staggered by the government. I am staggered by what is being done to the committee. Last Monday, we had a worthwhile, considered report on detention centres—not abandoning mandatory detention of asylum seekers but certainly seeking a whole raft of improvements—and today we present a report about reforming the United Nations. And what do we have? Two

dissenting reports. One is on the protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women—and what message does that send to the women of Australia?—and then a small number of government members dissenting against the establishment of the International Criminal Court. As I said, I have been privileged to be on this committee for a little while now, along with the deputy chairman of the committee and a fellow committee member. I am just staggered. (Time expired)

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Nehl)— Does the member for Throsby wish to move a motion in connection with the report, to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

**Mr HOLLIS** (Throsby) (1.05 p.m.) —We hope it will be. I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** —In accordance with standing order 102B, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.