

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Arguments for and against Visits

1.1 The terms of reference for the present inquiry do not relate to arguments for or against visits by nuclear armed and/or powered vessels. They take as their starting point the fact that these visits take place. The Committee has conducted its inquiry accordingly.

Origin of the Reference

1.2 On 27 March 1985 the Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, Senator G. D. McIntosh, asked the Minister representing the Minister for Defence, Senator the Hon G. J. Evans, in a question without notice, to comment on an article in the Age newspaper. The article contained a suggestion that local authorities would be excluded from cleaning-up operations in the event of nuclear accidents involving United States nuclear armed and/or powered warships in foreign countries.

1.3 In response Senator Evans said:

the United States has accepted absolute liability for any nuclear damage which might result from a nuclear incident involving the reactor of a United States warship. Australia expects that this will involve full co-operation in assisting with clean-up procedures, including assistance with radiation monitoring and decontamination. Australia would expect similar assistance in the event of a nuclear weapons accident. ... State authorities would co-ordinate responses

to nuclear accidents. However, the Commonwealth Government would provide assistance in the form of capabilities for radiation monitoring, decontamination and related clean-up activities. ... safety planning for foreign ship visits or anything of that kind is the responsibility of State and Territory governments rather than the Commonwealth. Within those jurisdictions, organisations have developed specific plans to cover nuclear reactor accidents.¹

1.4 The Minister for Defence provided additional information to the Chairman by letter on 18 July 1985. The Minister drew attention to the conditions of entry to Australia for nuclear powered warships and in particular the condition relating to safety planning, namely:

an operating safety organisation, competent to conduct a suitable radiation monitoring programme and able to initiate actions and provide services necessary to safeguard the public in the event of a release of radioactivity following an accident, must exist for the port being visited.

1.5 In his letter the Minister reiterated that a safety plan:

is prepared and, where necessary, implemented by a State or Territory NPW visits committee ... The Commonwealth assists in the provision of overall guidelines, advises on safety plans and radiation monitoring assistance, and co-ordinates through the National Disasters Organisation any additional Commonwealth support necessary.

1.6 The Chairman drew these responses to the attention of the Committee, which agreed that further information should be sought.

1.7 In August 1985 the Committee wrote to the State and Northern Territory Governments regarding safety procedures

1. Senate, Hansard, 27 March 1985, p. 878.

applying to the presence of nuclear powered warships in Australian ports and the emergency plans that were in place to respond to an accidental release of radiation. The Committee sought comment also on the demarcation of responsibilities between local, State/Territory, Federal and United States authorities in the event of a nuclear accident.

1.8 In response the Queensland, Tasmanian, Western Australian and Northern Territory Governments stated they had detailed contingency plans.² The Tasmanian and Northern Territory Governments said that they were satisfied that the visits of nuclear powered warships could be accommodated safely in their ports. The Western Australian Premier said that his State's Port Safety Scheme was under review.

1.9 The New South Wales Premier wrote that his State did not have any specific plans for dealing with accidental release of radiation from a nuclear powered vessel.³ He said that 'the [NSW] Government believes that many of the guidelines set down in the Federal Government document "Environmental Considerations of Visits by Nuclear Powered Warships to Australia" cannot be met in NSW ports'.

1.10 The Premier of Victoria replied that his Government opposed visits by nuclear powered vessels to his State, and expressed the view that if such visits took place then the Commonwealth 'should ... accept responsibility for all matters of health and safety'.⁴

1.11 The Premier of South Australia replied that the establishment of appropriate safety arrangements for visits had

2. Letters from the Premiers of Queensland (11 October 1985), Tasmania (14 October 1985) and Western Australia (4 September 1985), and the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory (23 August 1985).
3. Letter dated 29 October 1985. The view of the NSW Government on the status of Plan Point Piper is noted at para. 2.45 below.
4. Letter dated 22 August 1985.

not been proceeded with in South Australia.⁵

1.12 This variety of responses indicated to the Committee that what it saw as the desirable objective of uniform, agreed, Federal/State or Territory contingency plans, had not been achieved. It also suggested varying interpretations of the role of the Commonwealth with regard to nuclear powered ship visits.

1.13 The Committee believed that these discrepancies should be examined. Accordingly, on 17 September 1986 the Senate referred the following matter to the Committee:

The adequacy of current contingency planning by Federal and State authorities to deal with the accidental release of ionizing radiation from visiting nuclear powered or armed vessels in Australian waters and ports.⁶

Conduct of the Inquiry

1.14 The Committee advertised nationally and wrote seeking submissions from organisations and persons with a special interest in the reference. The Committee also wrote to a number of diplomatic missions in Canberra seeking information on their countries' safety plans relating to visits by nuclear powered or armed warships.

1.15 The Committee held public hearings on 3 days in Canberra. The Committee held a brief hearing in camera with witnesses from the Department of Defence. In February 1987, members of the Committee visited the Lucas Heights reactor site of the Australian Atomic Energy Commission (which on 27 April 1987 became the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation - ANSTO).

5. Letter dated 27 August 1985.

6. Journals of the Senate, 1986, p. 1207.

1.16 Both the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence and the reference lapsed with the dissolution of the 34th Parliament on 5 June 1987. On 22 September 1987 the Senate established the present Committee and referred to it the original terms of reference.⁷ Of the members of the present Committee, only Senator Hamer was a member of its predecessor and has been involved with the inquiry since its inception.

1.17 Members of the present Committee visited Fremantle and HMAS STIRLING at Cockburn Sound, WA in February 1988 to inspect and be briefed on aspects of safety and emergency planning relating to warship visits. Similar visits were made to Sydney and Hobart in March, 1988. A public hearing was held during the visit to Sydney. Three further public hearings were held in Canberra in May and June 1988. The Committee also held an in camera hearing at which an officer of the Department of Defence provided information on the safety aspects of nuclear weapons design and storage. Much material was obtained in response to questions put in writing by the Committee to the Department of Defence, ANSTO and others.

1.18 The inquiry received 102 submissions. Appendix I contains a list of those who made submissions. The persons appearing at all public hearings are listed in Appendix II.

Advisers

1.19 Because of the technical nature of some of the issues raised by the terms of reference, the original Committee in December 1986 appointed a technical adviser to assist it. The appointee was Mr G. K. Greenslade, who is the Head, Nuclear Plant Safety Unit, ANSTO. Mr Greenslade was re-appointed to assist the present Committee. Lieutenant Commander E. T. James, RAN was also appointed. The Committee records its appreciation to Mr Greenslade and Lieutenant Commander James for their assistance. It

7. Journals of the Senate, 63rd Session, 1987, pp. 96, 102.

also expresses its appreciation to ANSTO and the Minister and Department of Defence respectively for making them available.

Overseas Witnesses

1.20 A number of suggestions were put to the present Committee that it should invite private individuals from overseas to appear before it, so as to overcome what was perceived to be a lack of information within Australia on a number of key matters. The original Committee did hear Professor Jackson Davis from the United States, when he was in Australia.⁸ The Committee also invited Mr William Arkin of the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute to provide any information they might have that would assist the Committee. They did not do so. Apart from these invitations, the Committee did not act on these suggestions.

1.21 As explained at various points in this report, the Committee found itself unable to obtain information on some key matters. This was due to the policy of official secrecy which surrounds nuclear weapons and naval reactors. It seemed to the Committee highly unlikely that private individuals overseas with access to classified material would be willing to disclose that material to the Committee.⁹

1.22 Accordingly these individuals were not approached. Their writings and public testimony before committees of the United

8. Evidence, pp. 444-617.

9. For example, one individual whose name was put forward more than once as a suitable witness either did not know, or (more plausibly) believed it would be improper to disclose, such a basic fact as whether or not US naval reactors have containment. The situation was the same with respect to the power level of these reactors and other aspects of their design and operation. Another person whose name was put to the Committee as a possible witness was retired Rear Admiral La Rocque, USN. When appearing before a US Congressional Committee he (quite properly) declined to reveal classified information: US Congress, Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Subcommittee on Military Applications, Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons - Hearing, 10 September 1974, p. 17.

States Congress were, however, noted by the Committee, in a sincere attempt to ensure that all relevant publicly available material was considered.

Reason for a Detailed Report

1.23 It became apparent to the Committee during the course of its inquiry that there is a widespread lack of accurate information in the Australian community on the subject matter of the inquiry. The restrictions imposed by official secrecy have already been noted. But there is much relevant information in the public domain in fragmentary form which many of those interested in the subject do not appear to be aware of. Accordingly, the Committee considered that it would be useful to document extensively the sources of information available and on which it has relied.

1.24 Many of those who made submissions to the original inquiry appeared to be unaware of the contents of relevant Commonwealth documents. These documents, which are described in the following chapter, were incorporated in the transcripts of the December 1986 and March 1987 public hearings. Supplementary information received from the Department of Defence, ANSTO and others was also incorporated. The present Committee decided in May 1988 to send a copy of these transcripts to all those who made submissions, thereby giving them an opportunity to make further submissions based on the documents and information. Very few did so.