

Marrickville Peace Group

E: marrickvillepeacegroup@gmail.com W: www.marrickvillepeacegroup.org

Submission to the Defence Sub-Committee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into the benefits and risks of a Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement, as a basis of planning for, and funding of, Australian Defence capability.

Over many years since it first came into being late in 2002, the Marrickville Peace Group (MPG) has endeavoured to contribute to public debate about matters relating to peace and war.

Clearly, MPG is a civilian organisation. Its members have little, direct experience of military affairs. However, this does not restrict the groups ability to understand military and strategic matters and make useful contributions in the decision-making processes. It is a fundamental feature of any democracy that military decisions ultimately rest with civilians in government and that the views and opinions of ordinary citizens are of relevance to all decision-making processes. Ultimately, it is this that protects democratic societies and distinguishes them from societies being ruled by 'martial law'.

In Australia, MPG has been dismayed at the extent of 'bi-partisan' agreement between the two major parties on defence matters. As just one example, both of the major parties have consistently refused to countenance the idea that the deployment of the ADF for military action in foreign countries should be preceded by debate in the Parliament. This has made it clear to MPG that the two major parties have no wish to actively encourage debate about defence matters in the public sphere.

MPG has also observed growing reluctance to consult the general public about all military matters. In its experience, it has become increasingly difficult to gain access to 'consultations' about Defence White Papers, for example. The group has formed the view that such consultations increasingly take place between senior military figures, the government of the day and those in the armaments industry - who have a strong vested interest in the sale of weapons and weapons systems. Groups such as MPG (and other concerned individuals) feel increasingly excluded from processes that decide the Australian military's future. It appears to us that, for the simple reason that we are civilian, we are perceived as having nothing of significance to contribute.

Professor Richard Tanter (in his submissions to this Inquiry) has identified "a deep-rooted attitude of disdain towards community consultation" within the Defence establishment. MPG shares this view.

As a consequence, we are of the view that, effectively, military decisions are increasingly being made by those who are either part of the ADF or stand to benefit from weapons sales.

This is not a healthy situation. Without the objective assessment of decisions (and the decision-making process) by people and organisations that have no vested interest in them, there would be no safeguards against the increasing militarisation of Australian society.

MPG is aware that some military decisions have been plagued by such things as cost blow-outs and delays, and the so-called 'interference' of government decision-making. There is no reason to believe that these problems will be resolved by a bi-partisan agreement. Besides, the two major parties are extremely close already, in their approach to Australia's defence. Both parties are convinced, for example, of the importance of our alliance with the USA and the value of 'interoperability' between the ADF and US armed forces.

A bi-partisan agreement between the two major parties will do little to remedy the problems of procurement. However, what it might achieve is further reduction in public debate, about matters of great significance for every citizen.

If a bi-partisan agreement is reached, and if the major parties feel so inclined, they will be able to cut the public out of the debate entirely. As things stand for the present, MPG is of the view that there is far from enough public debate on military questions. An example is the presence of US marines in Darwin. Neither of the major parties has ever raised this as an issue, when, in the view of many in the civilian population, it is highly controversial. If the major parties agree between themselves that any, particular matter is unworthy of debate in parliament, there is little chance of it being debated in the media or the public domain.

The existing degree of bipartisanship inhibits public debate, which minimises sustained public consideration of defence issues. A formal Bipartisan Australian Defence Agreement would create a policy environment even more inimical to democratic accountability of government, based on public consideration of the interests of the Australian people.

In summary, the proposal for a bi-partisan agreement carries these significant risks:

- transparency in decision-making will be damaged
- public participation in the decision-making process will be reduced, because
- information about military matters will be harder to find, because
- parliamentary and public debate of military issues will be constrained.

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17 Riverside
Crescent
Marrickville
NSW 2204