

31 January 2023

Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

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Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Committee Secretary.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade concerning the Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Bill 2023.

Wollongong Against War and Nukes (WAWAN) is a local campaign group that has formed in response to the shortlisting of Port Kembla as a site for a federal nuclear submarine base in 2021.

WAWAN is made up of students, teachers, professionals, unionists and concerned citizens. Our group is responsible for a number of events in Port Kembla and Wollongong including public meetings, forums and protests.

WAWAN calls for the rejection of the Australian Naval Nuclear Power Safety Bill 2023. Our key concerns are as follows.

The Illawarra under threat

While the government has said that no decision about an east coast nuclear submarine base will be announced publicly for some time, this prospect remains on the table until ruled out. The Illawarra community has a long history of peace activism and resistance, which grounds our opposition to the acquisition of Australian nuclear submarines and their basing in our region.

The Bill enables the regulator to create “designated zones”, with what appears to be no avenue for review, community consultation or consent. The Illawarra community has clearly demonstrated its opposition to hosting AUKUS nuclear submarines for many reasons, including:

- The health and safety risks unique to nuclear technologies
- The higher prioritisation of Port Kembla for attack from adversaries, whether by conventional or nuclear means
- Support for renewable energy infrastructure in our port, instead of militarisation
- We reject the premise for the acquisition of nuclear submarines. This acquisition is not about the defence of Australia, but an aggressive and highly politicised manoeuvre that will only escalate tensions and the prospect of war in our region.
- Nuclear submarines are unnecessary for a safe and prosperous country, and will rob Australians of the resources for everyday needs such as healthcare and education.

Radioactive waste

We are deeply concerned that this Bill will enable the federal government to impose a radioactive waste facility in the Illawarra with no transparency or formal avenue to challenge the decision. The Bill will allow Defence to declare a “designated zone” without the free, prior and informed consent of Dharawal Traditional Owners, nor the general community.

Successive Australian federal governments have a deplorable track record on the management of radioactive waste, with decades of failed attempts to construct low and medium level radioactive waste dumps in unwilling communities in South Australia and the Northern Territory. These communities have endured many years of stress and division, as various tactics have been applied to manufacture consent. We don’t want to become another target for nuclear waste.

The Bill opens the door to the storage and disposal of international high-level nuclear waste from US and/or UK submarines. Australia has no experience with high-level nuclear waste, and should not impose such a burden on future generations, whether it is Australian or international high-level submarine waste. Worldwide, the disposal of radioactive waste is a major challenge, and expense, and we have no confidence that the Australian government can responsibly handle this dangerous material for the long timeframes necessary.

No regulatory independence

The Bill sets up a new regulatory body that reports to the Minister of Defence. As the Defence Ministry is the main proponent of AUKUS and the acquisition of nuclear-fuelled submarines, the regulator should be independent. The existing Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA), which sits within the Ministry of Health, would be a more appropriate regulatory body to oversee the many aspects of the project.

The International Atomic Energy Agency states, in its Fundamental Safety Principles, that an “independent regulatory body must be established and sustained.”

WAWAN would welcome the Committee visiting Port Kembla to consult with the local community and stakeholders here, to understand our concerns.

We are confident that our region will continue to actively oppose the acquisition of nuclear submarines and the imposition of a base at Port Kembla, which this Bill enables.

Yours sincerely,

Wollongong Against War and Nukes

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