

TT 4 March 2003
Submission 8.

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To: Committee, Treaties (REPS)
Subject: Submission

Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600

14 April 2003

Submission on Singapore Australia Free Trade Agreement

I would respectfully like to make a submission as a concerned individual and citizen of Australia. I do not understand how a treaty, which so effects the civil rights and democratic won gains of citizens, can be negotiated and signed without parliamentary scrutiny and extensive public consultation and debate. I am concerned because I see the SAFTA as a precursor to the USAFTA, which I believe will have even more wide-reaching negative implications for the Australian public.

I limit my submission to this point and use the suggestion provided by AFTINET to voice my concern:

Inadequate consultation and parliamentary oversight

The process of consultation regarding the SAFTA negotiations has been very poor. There may have been consultation with industry bodies, but there was little with civil society groups. There were no opportunities to give submissions prior to the negotiation of the agreement, and no disclosure of what the government was negotiating, including the "negative list" approach, until after the agreement was finalised.

The JSCOT review of SAFTA is the only opportunity for public input and parliamentary scrutiny of the agreement. However the government is proceeding with implementation legislation to remove tariffs before the review process has finished. The Australian Financial Review reported on 28 March 2003 that the government is trying to pass the SAFTA tariff implementation legislation prior to the review of SAFTA by JSCOT (p 5). The bill was to be introduced in late March but was delayed because of the heavy legislative program. It will be introduced in May, before the JSCOT review is finished.

The ignoring of the JSCOT review by government reinforces the need for all trade agreements to be debated and voted on by parliament.

SAFTA is to be reviewed after its first year. However the neglect of community consultation is reflected in the approach foreshadowed by DFAT to the first review of SAFTA: 'The Australian delegation will take into account the views of stakeholders such as industry and relevant government departments for the first review' (Regulatory Impact Statement p 18). Groups other than business and industry bodies are affected by this agreement, and should have input into the process of their negotiation and review, especially since many government services and policies will be affected by the review.

Recommendations:

(a) That no legislation relating to SAFTA be introduced or passed by Parliament until after the

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JSCOT review is completed.

(b) That there be a public community consultation process leading up to the review of the agreement.

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