

House of Representatives, Monday 23 September 2002

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr JULL (Fadden) (12.31 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report entitled *Review of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Defence annual reports, 2000-2001*, together with evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr JULL —by leave—I am pleased to present this report on behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. Not only is it our first report in this parliament, it is also the result of the first general review by the committee of annual reports from the government agencies within its area of interest. Traditionally, Senate committees, not joint or House committees, have conducted general annual report reviews.

We decided to review the annual reports from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID, Austrade and the Department of Defence for two main reasons: firstly, to make an active contribution to the processes by which the parliament holds the executive and its agencies to account; and, secondly, to seek status reports on various policy and operational issues outlined in the annual reports. At a practical level, it has allowed committee members from the House of Representatives to participate in an activity similar to that routinely available to senators.

The review involved two public hearings, one conducted by our foreign affairs subcommittee and the other by our defence subcommittee. Many of the issues raised at these hearings were also of interest to our trade and human rights subcommittees. This report contains a summary of the key issues discussed at the hearings. The foreign affairs and trade chapter of the report focuses on three themes: events in the Middle East and South America, following the committee's reports on these regions in the last parliament; Australia's relations with some of the countries in North and South Asia; and Australia's relations with our near neighbours, including Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and the developing nations of the South-West Pacific.

The scope of the defence chapter of the report is similarly broad. As well as commenting generally on Defence's performance in resourcing, management and acquisition, we considered, in some detail, the provision of support to Defence Force personnel and their families following operational deployment and in preparation for the transition from military service to civilian life. These issues are especially relevant, given the high level of operational tempo currently being experienced and the importance of retaining experienced and skilled personnel. Considerable effort is devoted to the provision of these services in the Defence Force, and over time their breadth and quality have improved.

There is scope, however, for further improvements to be made in the availability and effectiveness of transition services. We have made a series of recommendations to this end. For example, we have called on Defence to ensure that all Defence Force personnel returning from operational deployments are required to complete two weeks adjustment, or decompression, periods at work before undertaking recreational leave; and to make job placement services available to all Defence Force personnel moving from military service to civilian life.

With the exception of our recommendations on transitional management, the one-off nature of the hearings and the general absence of supporting written evidence means that we have not sought to undertake a full analysis of every issue raised at the hearings and mentioned in the

report. Nevertheless, from our perspective the review has been very useful and I expect that annual report reviews will become a regular part of the committee's work program.

Mr BEVIS (Brisbane) (12.35 p.m.)—I join with the member for Fadden in saying a few brief words on the report. At the outset, I should say that I am representing my good friend the member for Chifley, who is unable to be here because of attendance at a funeral in Sydney that the House is aware of. I would also like to put on the record my thanks to Senator Alan Ferguson for his chairmanship of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade and to the member for Fadden, David Jull, and the member for Maranoa, Bruce Scott, for their chairmanship of the two subcommittees that are the subject of this report. As is often the case, but seldom reported, these reports are unanimous views—that is, they are supported by all members of all parties. Sadly, when these things occur they do not always make headlines. Nonetheless, this is important business dealing with important issues. I think the constructive way in which the committee went about its affairs was a good sign for the operation of the parliament.

The committee process adopted this time was slightly different, as the member for Fadden has mentioned, and I think it has been a very useful process. In the last parliament, the committee used its annual report review powers as a way of examining issues of particular interest. For example, in the last parliament that process led to a focus on a review of military justice. I know that was an issue of great interest to the member for Chifley, who has done a considerable amount of work in that area.

On this occasion, the committee has begun a process of annual reviews which I think the committee has warmed to and would look to repeat. As has been mentioned, as part of that process it reviewed the operations of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, AusAID, Austrade and the Department of Defence. For the most part, those reviews involved a single day of public hearings and, as a consequence, there was limited scope. Nonetheless, that did afford the committee the opportunity to look at a number of important aspects, some of which the member for Fadden has just touched on. I will focus very briefly on a couple of the issues that were raised in respect of the Defence Annual Report and that have led to recommendations covered in the report being tabled now. They deal with issues such as the recruitment and retention policies and outcomes; the monitoring of unacceptable behaviour; ammunition shortfalls; the progress of acquisition projects, such as the Bushranger troop transport program, the Hawk lead-in fighter and the Jindalee Operational Radar Network—JORN.

There are a series of recommendations in the report which I think are very useful. There is comment in the recommendations on the monitoring and reporting of unacceptable behaviour, and a recommendation that in future the annual report should be segmented so that behaviours of a more serious nature are separately identified. I think that will refine the work of the committee and will be of benefit for those reviewing these matters. We have indicated that we will be seeking updates on development with respect to the military justice framework. I am sure that the member for Chifley will be at the front of those inquiries, especially as they relate to the positions of Director of Military Prosecutions and Inspector General of the Australian Defence Force.

One of the issues that emerged at the hearings on the Defence Annual Report was the importance of providing support to Defence Force personnel and their families, following operational deployment and in the preparation for transition from military service to civilian life. It is understandable, given the large number of deployments that have occurred in recent times, that this should be the subject of scrutiny by the parliament. I think it is fair to say all members of parliament participating in the committee were keen to ensure that Australia's service personnel are given every opportunity and support to assist their transition.

Finally, I would like to thank the secretariat. The Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee has over a long period of time been well served by very good personnel. That is the case again in this parliament and I would like to put on record my thanks to the secretariat for their support.

The SPEAKER —Order! The time allotted for statements on this report has expired. Does the member for Fadden wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

Mr JULL (Fadden) (12.40 p.m.) —Mr Speaker, I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

The 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.