

House of Representatives, Monday 20 October 1997

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr SINCLAIR (New England)(12.43 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the following reports together with the minutes of proceedings: *ANZUS after 45 years: Seminar proceedings , 11-12 August 1997*; *Sharpening the focus: Seminar on the Simons committee report , 11 July 1997*; and *From empire to partnership: A seminar on the Commonwealth of Nations , 20 August 1997*.

Ordered that the reports be printed.

Mr SINCLAIR —In opening I would like to commend the work of the member for Moncrieff (Mrs Sullivan), congratulate her on her elevation and say to her that I think the work of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure has been excellent. I think it is a great advantage to this House that we do have opportunities to debate issues of that sort.

Secondly, tabling these three reports, to my mind, in a place like this and at this time illustrates one of the problems that we have with the parliament. I think it is a great pity—not perhaps to us individually as parliamentarians but to Australia—that three fundamental subjects should be dealt with in a way which allows a perfunctory addressing of topics which are absolutely critical to Australia's future. It worries me that there is inadequate opportunity for debate on matters of this ilk, although they are so important.

There are three reports, and I have just tabled them. The first, on ANZUS, related very much to the affairs of the Ausmin talks which the Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr Downer) and the Minister for Defence (Mr McLachlan) undertook in Washington only a few weeks ago. They did identify many of the issues, and I will speak a little on it.

Sharpening the focus: Report on a seminar on the Simons committee report again is a very important subject for Australia, not just on the question of how much development assistance aid should be provided but the nature of the report, the emphasis it gave and the fact that it was the first report for so many years. The third report, on the Commonwealth of Nations, which is a preliminary to the visit of the Prime Minister (Mr Howard) to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh tomorrow, is equally important. It is a pity that there is not more opportunity to debate each of them.

Each of these reports results from seminars held by the joint standing committee. I think the seminars are a very useful way to look at a foreign policy or defence issue. We conducted these over the winter and, while the seminars do not necessarily provide the same opportunities for detailed scrutiny as a full inquiry, the seminar process certainly enabled us to bring together a diverse range of individuals and groups to discuss the significance of each of the issues.

The dialogue between all of the participants is extremely constructive, and one of the major benefits at each of the seminars was the interchange of ideas between people from quite different backgrounds and points of view. The committee has held a series of these seminars since July 1996, and I think all of us feel that not only has it been worth while from our point of view but I am glad to report to the House that we have had very considerable positive feedback on the format and the processes they follow.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all of the government officials, members of the diplomatic corps, business representatives, academics, members of the NGO community, members of parliament and members of the general community who attended these seminars and contributed so much to their success. My personal thanks go also to those members of the joint standing committee who participated in and made these seminars possible and so worth while.

I would like to make some brief comments on each of the reports, and hopefully will have a further opportunity in the Main Committee to debate each of the subjects as I believe they deserve. The first seminar dealt with a review of the Australian aid program by the committee chaired by Mr Paul Simons. The seminar was held at the request of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The report itself, as members will remember, was released in early May. At that time the minister undertook that there would be a period of wide public consultation before the report was considered by government. Our seminar was one of many seminars and conferences on the subject held around the country.

The committee was very pleased to have all of the members of the Simons committee present at the seminar, and indeed they all participated fully—Paul Simons, Gaye Hart and Professor Cliff Walsh—and also the Director-General of AusAID, Trevor Kanaley, and a significant number of his staff. We were also pleased that the Head of the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, Mr James Michel, who was visiting Australia at the time, was able to join us and contribute to our discussions.

The Simons review is the first major review of the development assistance program since the Jackson report of the early 1980s. It was the general feeling that reviews of this kind need to be done somewhat more regularly—a 13-year gap is too great. One of the recommendations of the Simons committee endorsed by the joint standing committee was for the establishment of an advisory board to assist AusAID management in the direction of the development assistance program. Hopefully, with such input the process of finetuning the aid program will be simplified for all involved.

The seminar did not set out to cover all aspects of the Simons report. Anyone who has examined that report will know that it is an extremely comprehensive examination of the aid program. However, the seminar did look at issues such as overseas trends in development assistance; refocusing the aid program, taking into account geographic and sectoral factors; soft loans and concessional financing; the question of whether Australian aid should be untied; and the whole issue of NGOs and their role in the Australian aid program.

The Simons committee report carries the title One clear objective: Poverty reduction through sustainable development. The joint committee supports the concept that a prime motivation for a development assistance program is humanitarian. But the committee is concerned that too narrow a definition of poverty might be adopted. Development assistance encompasses a range of activities designed to improve the standard of living of people in developing countries, through infrastructure projects, educational activities or assistance to micro enterprises, as well as immediate assistance to those suffering from hunger and homelessness. The committee agrees that assistance should be through sustainable development activities. The committee also acknowledges that other policy objectives may be met through the aid program, without detracting from its fundamental purpose. After all, a fundamental purpose of aid is to satisfy the taxpayers that the expenditure of those funds is to the advantage of Australia.

The joint standing committee has made 15 recommendations in all regarding the Simons review and the general running of the aid program. The committee remains concerned about the obvious resource implications, both staffing and budgetary, for AusAID should all of the recommendations of the Simons review be instituted. This will obviously be a matter of great importance for the government at this time of budgetary restrictions, but will have to be addressed if Australia is to maximise the impact of its aid budget.

The second report deals with the ANZUS alliance. The seminar on the ANZUS alliance, held in August 1997, assembled some of the most pre-eminent and authoritative speakers from Australia and the United States, and of course some from New Zealand, to share their views on the current status, relevance and future prospects for this security treaty. The alliance with the United States continues to be fundamental in Australia's defence agreements. Few dispute

this. The previous government's defence white paper accepted the value of the US alliance as a key element of Australia's defence policy, and this government's recently released foreign and trade white paper reaffirms the importance of this relationship.

The seminar sought to inform the parliament, and the wider public, through open discussion of all the provisions and implications of those provisions of the treaty. The one great internal change in ANZUS since its inception has come about because of the adoption by New Zealand of its prohibition of ship visits by nuclear powered vessels. Discussion took place on current New Zealand defence policies, regrettably without official representation from the New Zealand government. As I mentioned, there were participants from New Zealand there. New Zealand's suspension from trilateral activities is an unresolved issue for the alliance, although this apparently is of greater concern to Australia than to the United States or New Zealand.

The committee, in reporting its views of the seminar, chose to keep its remarks brief. In so doing, the words of the individual speakers have been allowed to stand by themselves. While individually noteworthy, these presentations collectively provide a comprehensive overview of the alliance and of its continuing value not just for Australia but also for the United States, and for regional nations. Following two days of discussions, the consensus emerged that there remains for Australia distinct advantage in maintaining the ANZUS relationship.

The third report concerns the Commonwealth of Nations and, given the imminent Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh, it is particularly relevant. The committee was interested in examining whether the Commonwealth remains quite as relevant in the post-apartheid era and in the post-Cold War period and, indeed, whether it is of even more relevance given the momentous changes in the international arena that have occurred over the last decade. The Commonwealth has changed in many ways since it was called the British Commonwealth, and it was quickly apparent to the committee that a number of misconceptions still exist about the organisation.

The seminar covered topics such as the role of CHOGM and other meetings; public perceptions of the Commonwealth; the 'unofficial Commonwealth'—that is, the vast number of non-government organisations that exist among Commonwealth countries; the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association; trade and investment issues; and human rights and the Commonwealth. Time does not permit me to go into any depth on these issues, but I would recommend the report and the transcript of the seminar to all who have an interest in the Commonwealth and the remarkably diverse benefits that flow from it to Australia.

I conclude my remarks by thanking once again all those who gave their time to participate in these seminars. In particular, I would like to thank the secretariat of the joint committee, Joanne Towner and all those who were contributors to this process. The committee has found the seminar process to be a most useful means of exploring issues in a comparatively short time frame, and believes the reports contain a number of issues that merit full consideration by government. I regret that I have so little time to deal with them, but I do commend the three reports to the House.

Mr PRICE (Chifley)(12.55 p.m.) —Like the right honourable member for New England (Mr Sinclair), I would like to commend the three reports by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to the House. I would also like to acknowledge the role of the chairman, the right honourable member for New England, in initiating this particular form of committee activity for the joint committee. He has certainly made it his own, and I concur with his remarks. I believe it is a very useful forum for bringing disparate people together to discuss important issues relevant to the nation. I could be unkind and suggest that we are perhaps seminared out for a little while. If that is the case, I have no doubt that next year we will still be having one or two seminars, but again I commend him for introducing this format.

All of the reports are important and in the brief time that is left to me I would just like to say in regard to the seminar on the Simons committee report, Sharpening the focus, that one needs to consider that this was done against the backdrop of a disastrous initiative by the new Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mr Downer) in abolishing DIFF and a number of other funding mechanisms for our region that caused an absolute uproar. As has been pointed out, the Simons committee is the first review of overseas aid in 13 years since the Jackson report. When we think of overseas aid, it really is an investment in humanity. It is a small contribution that we make but if we wish to be good world corporate citizens, as I would hope all Australians would want to be, it is a very small investment in humanity. I know that my party is reconsidering a couple of the important issues addressed by the Simons committee and they include the quantum, or level, that we should really set in terms of overseas aid. Like the chairman, I have difficulty with just one focus for overseas aid. I certainly believe, although I commend poverty reduction of course, that sometimes overseas aid should have a broader focus than just that.

The seminar on ANZUS was very important because there is no more fundamental agreement or arrangement for our national security, and it is really interesting, as has been pointed out, that it has survived New Zealand dropping out of what was a tripartite arrangement because of its objection to ships visiting with a nuclear capability. I thought the seminar certainly benefited from lots of illustrious contributions and, indeed, even the chairman's illustrious contribution in one session, but I would also like to commend to people the contribution by the Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, who gave an excellent overview of the Labor years and the future. The present government suggests that it has already, in 18 months, improved the Australian-American alliance. I have got no doubt that it has put a great emphasis on that, but it is very false to suggest that there was somehow not a pre-existing, excellent relationship contributed to by a number of defence ministers.

We do not do enough to publicise the importance of the ANZUS treaty and the benefits that accrue to all Australians through it. I am one of those who believe that into the future we need to be looking at new and different ways of strengthening it. If I have one particular fear it is that the treaty is far more important to Australia than it is to America. I believe, without in any way denigrating the strength of the current relationship, that in defence and strategic terms we probably need to move to become just a little more self-sufficient than we currently are and perhaps not quite so dependent on the United States of America, but the US is the last remaining superpower that we want to move closer to. I do not dispute that we want to have the joint operations and interoperability, and I see all these things as beneficial. (Time expired)

Mr SPEAKER —Order! The time allotted for statements on these reports has expired. Does the right honourable member for New England wish to move a motion in connection with the reports to enable them to be debated on a future occasion?

Mr SINCLAIR (New England) —I move:

That the House take note of the reports.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

Mr 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.