

Australian parliamentary report urges boost to war powers

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An Australian government-initiated parliamentary inquiry last week called for greater executive power to launch wars, in particular without UN Security Council approval. At the same time, in order to try to divert rising anti-war sentiment, it proposed cosmetic measures to obtain parliamentary approval of such wars—but only after they have already started!

Commissioned by Defence Minister Richard Marles last September, the inquiry's report is another warning that the Labor government is preparing to join an aggressive US-led war against China, and regardless of even pretence of adhering to international law by obtaining authorisation from the UN Security Council.

The parliamentary report has been barely mentioned, let alone accurately reported, in the corporate media. That reflects real nervousness in ruling circles about publicising the strengthening of the anti-democratic war-launching mechanisms.

Its release follows the Albanese government's announcement of the allocation of \$368 billion over 30 years for the purchase of nuclear-powered attack submarines, along with hypersonic missiles and other offensive weaponry, as part of the AUKUS pact with the US and UK governments, clearly directed at preparing for war against China.

It comes amid a barrage of media material seeking to acclimatise the public to the prospect of a catastrophic war with China that would almost certainly involve the use of nuclear weapons. That included a "Red Alert" series in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other Nine network outlets declaring the need to prepare for war against China within three years.

This timeline comes direct from the American military. US Air Force General Michael Minihan earlier this year forecast an American war with China by 2025.

That war is always depicted as a response to alleged Chinese aggression, including over the island of Taiwan, which for the past 50 years has been internationally recognised as part of China. In reality, the US is increasingly encircling China militarily and seeking to cripple it economically.

Having identified China as the chief threat to the hegemony that American imperialism established through World War II, Washington is seeking to goad the Beijing regime into a conflict, as it did with the Russian government over Ukraine. The US deliberately provoked the rapidly escalating NATO war in Europe that is seen as the prelude to war with China.

As a recent Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) series reported, figures inside the military-intelligence apparatus are

warning of the political alarm if people in Australia suddenly find themselves at war with China.

The ABC pointed out: "Australians could wake up one morning to the news that we are at war with China. Confronting as that would be, perhaps more confronting is something many people do not realise: such a decision would not require any consultation in parliament. The decision to go to war would not require a public discussion."

Nevertheless, the parliamentary report, prepared by a committee with a Labor majority, emphatically declares that "decisions regarding armed conflict including war or warlike operations are fundamentally a prerogative of the Executive."

That is the Labor government's own position. Even as he commissioned the report, Marles wrote to the committee chair, Shayne Neumann MP, stating that he was "firmly of the view" that the current war powers arrangements "should not be disturbed."

However, the report goes further, recommending the strengthening of those powers, especially for wars "not supported by resolution by the United Nations Security Council, or an invitation of a sovereign nation."

This is a further warning of the type of war that the Australian ruling class and its allies, notably the AUKUS partners, are preparing. Whatever the pretext for military action against China, the US-led powers demand the power to go to war without even the fig leaf of UN authorisation, as they did in Iraq in 2003.

While the UN, essentially a clearing house for the interests of the imperialist powers, has never proven an obstacle to US-led wars, a war conducted without formal Security Council approval runs the risk of exposing those responsible to charges of launching an illegal war of aggression.

That is the primary reason why the report, issued by the Defence Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, urges the government to undertake any armed conflicts by invoking the power of the governor-general as the "commander-in-chief" of the armed forces under section 68 of the Australian Constitution, rather than by exercising the powers of the defence minister under the Defence Act.

The report said this would protect the war-making decision from any legal challenge, either domestic or international, and shield Australian military personnel from war crimes charges. "Such decisions of the Governor-General are not justiciable," that is, they are immune from legal or constitutional objection.

The 1901 Constitution, a colonial-era document adopted by the emerging Australian capitalist class, deliberately retained the “prerogative” powers of the British monarchy, which include the power to declare war, and vested them in the hands of the governor-general.

The committee insists that the war power must be kept in the grip of a tiny cabal, essentially consisting of the prime minister, and perhaps members of the cabinet’s national security committee, advising the governor-general to authorise a war declaration.

In practice, any decision to go to war with China would be made in Washington. That is not least because Australia hosts vital US military and intelligence facilities, such as the Pine Gap communications and surveillance station in central Australia and other bases across northern Australia.

Particularly since 2011, when US President Obama announced Washington’s military and strategic “pivot to Asia” on the floor of the Australian parliament, Labor and Liberal-National governments alike have increasingly integrated Australia into US military operations, making it an essential platform for a war against China.

This integration embodies the Australian ruling class’s unconditional alignment behind US imperialism on which it has depended since World War II to prosecute its own predatory imperialist interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

Cosmetic measures

The parliamentary committee was conscious of the hostility among workers and youth to being plunged into war, especially after the barbaric disasters, involving the deaths of millions of people, of the Vietnam War and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—all conducted on the basis of lies and propaganda.

The report referred to two surveys that at least partially measured the anti-war sentiment. A 2021 Digital Edge poll found that 87 percent of Australians agreed with the proposition that “war decisions should be subject to parliamentary approval always or unless there is immediate danger to Australia.” Roy Morgan research conducted in 2020 said 83 percent of respondents supported reforms to require parliamentary approval prior to any decision being taken.

In a bid to quell such opposition, the report proposes token measures to give the appearance of parliamentary consultation, essentially in order to use a parliamentary rubber stamp to generate public support for a war that had already been triggered.

One recommendation is that the Cabinet Handbook, which has no binding legal effect, require that parliament be recalled “as soon as possible to be advised” of a war decision. Even this toothless gesture could be scrapped if “not possible due to extenuating and appropriate circumstances.”

The government would then “facilitate a debate in both Houses of Parliament at the earliest opportunity, either prior to deployment of the Australian Defence Force or within thirty (30) days of deployment.”

Any government could brush aside these cosmetic procedures. The governor-general could “approve deferral of any of these requirements in specific circumstances, such as high risks to national security or imminent threat to Australian territories or civilian lives.”

The essential political agenda behind such proposals is to legitimise a war and drum up popular support for it. In his submission to the inquiry, Professor George Williams wrote: “One of the parliament’s main functions is ... to build community confidence in contentious and difficult areas by demonstrating that the people’s representatives have gone through a deliberative process and listened to the arguments publicly and transparently.”

In other words, parliament’s role is to seek to mobilise the population behind what would be a disastrous war of aggression, not prevent one.

A similar stance was taken by Australians for War Powers Reform (AWPR). The report noted that AWPR said “Parliament served as a means for the Government to convince the Australian public regarding the necessity for the war.” At committee hearings, AWPR witnesses assured the inquiry that parliamentary approval would be a sure thing, “due to Australia’s general bipartisanship on matters relating to defence.”

As these submissions demonstrate, parliament is not the means to stop war. Rather, it is part of the capitalist state apparatus, dominated by the parties that defend the profit interests of the Australian ruling class, including its domination and plunder of the South Pacific and other parts of the region.

That includes the Greens. They filed a dissenting report, urging support for a 2020 bill requiring a joint sitting of parliament to approve military deployments overseas. That bill would allow the governor-general, “by proclamation” to declare that an “emergency” required a deployment without parliamentary approval.

But the capitalist class launches every war on claims of “emergency,” such as the fraudulent claims of the imminent threat of “weapons of mass destruction” concocted as the pretext for the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The real purpose was to assert US control over the oil and resource-rich country at the centre of the strategically crucial Middle East.

Workers and young people need to draw a warning from the move to boost, and dress up, the war powers. Far from being a check on the threat of a third world war being provoked by the US and its allies, the parliamentary establishment is pivotal to the war preparations. That danger can be answered only by a globally unified movement of the working class to abolish the source of conflict, the capitalist profit system itself.



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