Australian government establishes inquiry to prepare for war

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The Australian Labor government unveiled a parliamentary inquiry on Tuesday into the country's "national civil preparedness and resilience." The framework within which the inquiry was established, its terms of reference and the explicit statements of senior ministers make clear its whole focus is on "preparedness" for war.

Australia is fully integrated into the developing US-led global war, including the illegal assault on Iran, the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and a vast military build-up in the Indo-Pacific targeting China.

In that context, there has been no shortage of defence-related inquiries and announcements, as the Labor government has increased military spending to record levels of $60 billion a year and embarked upon a host of weapons acquisitions.

The focus of this inquiry, however, appears to be different. It is not dedicated to the military build-up in a general sense, or this or that aspect of the defence force.

Instead, everything released so far indicates that this is an inquiry into how to operationally wage a war, not one that is far away, as in the assault on Iran, nor in the distant future, but one in the near term and in this region. Its remit includes how such a war would be waged on the home front, by subordinating every aspect of society, including the economy, to the military effort and suppressing inevitable opposition.

In a press conference on Thursday, Defence Minister Richard Marles did not seek to conceal the unprecedented character of the inquiry. "[T[his is not something that we have done in Australia, probably since the Second World War," he said.

The inquiry was a "means by which we think about the way in which our civilian economy, our private economy, would interact with the Defence Force in the event of any contingency," i.e., a war. Marles menacingly added, "Now, it is important that we are able to prepare for that, that we're able to exercise those muscles, if I could put it that way."

The venue tied in with Marles' remarks. He was in Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory, for the close of Operation Pitch Black, a massive military exercise preparing for aerial war involving the US and 20 other allied powers. Marles used the occasion to announce the purchase of 450 Joint Advanced Tactical Missiles, from the US, which he boasted are the "latest generation of air-to-air missiles," with a "longer range" than anything Australia currently possesses.

Darwin is at the centre of the US-Australian military build-up with seven military facilities in or near the city and a contingent of 2,500 American marines. In 2024, Republican Congressman Michael McCaul described the city as the "central base of operations from which to project power," i.e., through which to launch naval and aerial operations in the Indo-Pacific targeting China.

The fact that the new inquiry is about preparing to wage war with China, heavily implicit in Marles' statements, was made explicit by an anonymous federal government source. According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the source "stressed that the government did not believe that war was inevitable, but said parliament had to do more to prepare the nation for the catastrophic consequences that could flow from a conflict in Asia, or even on the Australian mainland."

When governments begin assuring the population via anonymous sources that war is "not inevitable," but that it is necessary to be prepared nonetheless, it is clear that they are far down the path of planning and preparing for a conflict.

That is the whole logic of Australia's integration into the US build-up in the Indo-Pacific. Government claims that it is "defensive" or a response to Chinese actions are bogus. In reality, the US has explicitly labelled China as a threat to its global hegemony, and is responding by preparing an aggressive war.

Successive governments, beginning with the Gillard Labor administration in 2011, have been fully committed to this project. But they have sought to shroud the military build-up behind closed doors. They are aware that the war they are preparing is massively unpopular, and would trigger enormous social and political upheavals.

The inquiry is directed to addressing those explosive

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issues.

Two of its terms of reference relate to economic "preparedness" for war. One references ensuring critical supplies in case of "crisis or conflict." Australia's vulnerability has been clear in the US-led war against Iran, which it has participated in, with threats of fuel shortages shortly after the assault was launched, which persist.

The other term of reference raises the need for "collaboration with the private sector including key national logistics and infrastructure operators, as well as manufacturing, resources and primary industries."

That is the attempt to create a "war economy," which the Labor government is already carrying out, including through large-scale investment in critical minerals aimed at breaking China's current monopoly, as well as the ever-greater subordination of universities and other public institutions to defence.

Harnessing the economy and society as a whole to war means repressing opposition.

That is implicitly raised in two of the other terms of reference, which calls for "activating and preparing the broader Australian community for contingencies."

Committee chair Deborah O'Neil declared in announcing the inquiry: "The task of defending the nation and deterring assaults on our sovereignty falls not only to armed service men and women but to every Australian, and engages every sector of the economy and our civil society."

That is the language of militaristic authoritarianism. If "every Australian" is responsible for "defending the nation," then opposition to war is beyond the pale.

Successive governments have already taken major steps towards criminalising opposition to imperialist war.

That included the bipartisan passage in 2018 of foreign interference laws, under which hostility to and the exposure of war could be punished as espionage or service to a foreign power. And in the context of its support for the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the current Labor government this year passed sweeping "hate speech" laws which could illegalise strident condemnations of Zionism and imperialism, and parallel provisions for the banning of political parties on the same grounds.

The final term of reference is: "Exploring international best practice on national civil preparedness, including collaboration with international partners on best practices and how it might be adapted to the Australian context."

The wording is vague. Its meaning is illuminated by a research paper published by the Australian Army Research Centre in April entitled "Total Defence." The subject of the research paper and the language it used was almost identical to the inquiry's final term of reference.

The paper examined "civil preparedness" in several countries, including Lithuania, Singapore and Finland. It hailed the fact that each of them enforced a regime of compulsory military service and drew attention to what it presented as the nationalist and pro-military political culture of those nations. Singapore is a dictatorship in all but name.

The research paper, while stopping short of advocating conscription, suggested "voluntary" means by which broader sections of the population could be drawn into the military build-up. It raised the need to prepare the population "psychologically" for conflict and warned against purported threats to "social cohesion" in the event of war, including the culturally diverse character of Australia's population.

For years, there has been a discussion in military-aligned think tanks about the need for extraordinary measures to be taken, including proposals for the stationing of nuclear weapons in Australia and compulsory military service. The inquiry signals that such discussions are now being formally brought into the corridors of parliament, in preparation for them to be implemented.

The inquiry involves the Labor government and the Liberal-National opposition. It is an initiative of the joint parliamentary committee on defence, a permanent bipartisan body established by Labor in January.

In opposition to that de facto war cabinet, the working class must build an anti-war movement, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective, connecting the fight against militarism to the struggle against austerity and a capitalist system that is hurtling towards global catastrophe.

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