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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

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Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 29 October 2009

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Speaker Robert, Stuart, MP	Question No.

Mr ROBERT (Fadden) (11.41 am)—I rise to lend some comment to the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into the Defence annual report 2007-08. Let me first of all acknowledge Arch Bevis, member for Brisbane, as chair of the committee, who is certainly a wasted talent sitting on Labor's backbench. If the Prime Minister had any sense at all, he would seek to promote a talent such as Arch Bevis, who has led the committee so incredibly well. I certainly pay him the respect he deserves. I also thank the defence adviser, Wing Commander David Ashworth, for all his work. I can only hope that in coming here he has learnt a lot about how the committee works, indeed how the parliament works, and can take that experience back to his professional career as an Air Force officer. I also thank the secretariat for the hard work they have done not only on this report but also throughout the year as the defence committee gets across the vast portfolio which is Defence within the Australian security environment.

The Defence annual report ostensibly looked at four key areas and its recommendations are factored around those. They have to do with procurement, with Defence pay systems, with issues involving our submarine facilities and with fuel. I wish to make a few comments with respect to those four areas.

First, with procurement, the committee recommends that, in the absence of a clear strategic case for high risk, first of type lead customer, we go with a MOTS program, MOTS being military off the shelf. In a corporate sense we would go with COTS, commercial off the shelf: that we would buy, we would borrow and then build as a last resort. The committee recommends this strongly for Defence as well. Buy off the shelf first. Borrow it second. And if you must, for clearly identified reasons, then go for a build option. We know with Defence's top 20 projects 16 of them are first of customer, first of type—an incredibly high-risk strategy. We also know from questioning Dr Gumley over the best approach that we should be an aggressive follower, in his words slightly behind the power curve; second or third customer first of type, to give an example. It is something we would impress upon the military, notwithstanding their ability on a strategic case-by-case basis to go for a build in the first instance.

Secondly, the Defence annual report inquiry recommends strongly that a high priority is placed on fixing the current pay disputes. KPMG has quite rightly identified a range of issues that need to be resolved quickly. The minister needs to take this as a high priority. There is probably no greater crime in the military, having served there for many years, than not paying the soldiers, sailors and airmen. It is important that we pay them on time. They have commitments, they have families and they need to have confidence in the administrative systems that support them, especially when they are fighting on the front line, which is the front line of freedom for all Western democracies.

Our third series of recommendations has to do with our submarine fleet. I believe personally we need an inquiry into the current state of our submarine fleet, its operational readiness, its capacity to deploy, its crewing issues and where the whole submarine fleet is going. Notwithstanding that as my personal belief about where we should go, we as a committee are recommending that the submarine escape training facility at *HMAS Stirling* be resolved, be re-established and function as a dedicated requirement to allow the training of our submariners in how to flee a sinking submarine. I can think of nothing more harrowing than being in a tin can as it descends to the bottom of the ocean when we do not have the facility to train our men and women on how to get out of that can. And, of course, we have a range of deployability issues with the Australian Submarine Rescue Vehicle *Remora* that need to be resolved without delay.

The final set of recommendations that the defence committee looked at had to do with fuel. With respect to the climate change debate, wherever one sits on the spectrum, what is important is managing the risks. One of the risks as we move forward is reliance on fossil fuels. I have a vision that one day this nation can rise up and be fully reliant on its own source of renewable energy and domestic fuel, that we can move away from reliance on Middle Eastern oil and that we can treat fuel as a strategic resource and have energy security as a priority within our nation. Our defence needs to have an assertive strategy on how it deals with its own energy security, especially with respect to fuels. There are a range of risks that need to be mitigated in our high dependence on

oil and other fuels that go with it. The committee are firmly of the view that we need to mitigate that risk and set an agenda for the next 10 years on how we do that.

The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade is an outstanding committee. It has taken a bipartisan approach to all issues that I have been involved with over the term of this parliament. Its view on these four recommendations is strong, and it looks forward to Defence's response.

Debate (on motion by **Ms Owens**) adjourned.