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14 March 2023

STATEMENT ON AUKUS

Submarine decision an outrageous assault on peace, democracy and vulnerable Australians

The naval nuclear reactors for Australia, announced today, represent one of the lowest points in Australian democracy in living memory. Unimaginable expenditure – up to \$368 billion – has been announced for a single weapons capability, submarines, in a decision that was made behind closed doors and is overflowing with risks, many of which have barely been acknowledged yet. They include very significant risks to health and healthcare for Australians. Prime Minister Albanese has betrayed his own people.

There is no doubt that vulnerable Australians will suffer even more in order for such largesse to flow to the military-industrial complex. Opposition leader Dutton has already indicated that the NDIS, a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of Australians with particular needs, might need to be attacked. Our health care system is in crisis in many areas. Countless thousands of Australians have nowhere to live, and yet our biggest financial investments will be in preparing to join yet another war of choice, this time between the US and China.

Specifically, the submarines are intended to take part in a nuclear war, despite not being nuclear-armed themselves. Such a war would cause unimaginable human and environmental suffering, with Australia possibly being in the firing line. Funding for diplomacy and arms control pales compared to our funding for war-fighting. If, as the PM says, Australia is committed to remaining a non-nuclear weapons state, then the government must sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, a step it has previously promised. This is increasingly urgent as some other nations will perceive our intentions differently.

The submarine decision has been taken, in the name of defending 'democracy', by a tiny handful of people, with not a single Australian outside elite circles – some with vested interests – being consulted and listened to. Australians will simply suffer dwindling essential services, and possibly the human and other costs of war, to pay for the decision. That's how autocracies operate, not democracies.

Naval nuclear reactors are to be imposed on one of our cities, currently thought to be Wollongong, after zero consultation with the people there. This is a particularly egregious development given the long-standing civil society opposition to nuclear power in this country, opposition based on a well-founded fear of nuclear accident and resultant radioactive contamination. Nuclear reactor accidents are far more common than is officially admitted. The 'exemplary' safety record for UK and US submarines that our Defence Department [claims](#) is simply not true.

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Two United States Navy submarines have [sunk](#) in recent decades as a result of accident. In the UK, it was [revealed](#) in parliament in 2018 that there had been more than 500 submarine safety incidents in the previous 12 years, with the Ministry of Defence admitting to two events with "high potential for radioactive release to the environment". In 2006 a submarine was within metres of disaster off the British coast and 2 crew members died, and in 2010 an HMS Astute submarine ran aground off the Isle of Skye (refs [here](#)).

It is unclear whether any assessments of the suitability of Port Kembla to accommodate nuclear reactors have even been done. Military secrecy will operate, compounding the difficulties for communities wanting information rather than platitudes. Navy Command Headquarters in the UK Ministry of Defence states that "The Government does not disclose any information, either operational or otherwise, about Royal Navy submarines as to do so would, or would be likely to, prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces." How would an accident involving a foreign nuclear submarine be managed if we cannot even have access to information about the type of reactor?

Which agency would coordinate the response to a nuclear accident at Port Kembla? Given the emphasis on secrecy that has characterised every step of the submarine proposal, one could reasonably assume that the Defence Department would want to control the response and the public messaging. Human health and safety would take second place to 'national security' and military secrecy.

There are other questions that haven't even been asked, let alone answered. What will be the carbon emissions from this vast submarine-building complex? How will the ramped-up hostility that we are witnessing affect prospects for climate action by the big powers?

And the nuclear waste – still an unresolved and intractable problem with nuclear power. We're told that the submarines won't need refuelling for the life of the vessel, but that is about 30 years. What then? Will Australia become the dumping ground for high level nuclear waste? Already the US and the UK have stores of submarine nuclear waste that they don't know what to do with.

Twenty years ago, the three nations now comprising AUKUS conducted an illegal invasion of Iraq, leaving a humanitarian disaster on a huge scale. AUKUS is the 'coalition of the willing' rebranded. Rather than gearing up for the next war, those three nations should pause to reflect the costs of war.

ENDS

Attributable to Dr Sue Wareham, President, Medical Association for Prevention of War.