Chris Barrie – Address at National Press Club – 4th November 2026

Launch of the AUKUS public inquiry report, *Surrendering Australia: The AUKUS Deception, hosted by Greg Jennett*.

Peter [Garrett] has canvassed the report in considerable detail and I'm not going to do that. What I am going to do is concentrate on the strategic and defence issues.

In 1998, I was appointed Chief of the Australian Defence Force, and handing over command 4 years later, I continued to consider it a part of my duty to comment on matters of genuine consequence for Australia's security, especially when they may impact negatively on Australia's national well-being.

Since September 2021, much of what I have read about AUKUS has worried me. That's why I agreed to serve as a commissioner on this public inquiry. I commend the report to everybody.

Every Australian should read this report because it's very important. It should be read widely, and it asks the questions that need urgent answers.

Now, I learned a lot from the inquiry process. This report can help us all become much better informed about what's been going on and the missteps that could be ahead as the AUKUS plan unfolds. Each of us can then decide whether to support AUKUS or dispense with the submarine components as we are recommending.

The government and the opposition did not take up written invitations to participate, nor did we hear from anyone serving in the Australian Defence Organisation. And you know, that's a pity, because we would have been able to scrutinise the arguments and the plans in favour of AUKUS.

Were ministers and officials reluctant to have the uncertainties, the risks, the vulnerabilities exposed in a public inquiry like ours?

The report we are releasing today is very clear. The AUKUS submarine plan is untenable. It should be ended as soon as possible, and we should never allow an acquisition program like AUKUS to define our national security strategy.

Why is this?

First, what are the prospects that Australia, of its own volition, would ever go to war with any other country, including China? It would not be in our interests and China is in the region in which we live.

China has the world's largest navy by a number of ships and the world's largest shipbuilding capacity. It's also one of our most important trading partners. And it's also the country of ancestry for over 1 in 20 fellow Australians.

It would be madness for us to take on a great power like China.

The only way I can conceive of Australians being involved in a war with China would be by joining a conflict between the United States and China, and that may serve the interests of the United States, but I cannot see that it would serve ours.

My point is, it makes no sense to build our defence force around that possibility. Yet the long-range missions these submarines are designed for make no sense in exactly that kind of war.

Second, AUKUS has put Australia's long-standing support for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone under strain. We are grappling with what it means to become the first non-nuclear weapons state to operate nuclear-powered submarines, fuelled by weapons-grade uranium. There are a lot of questions, but again, no answers.

AUKUS has come at a time when the world is dismantling the safeguards it put in place to reduce the risk of nuclear war, proudly by some Australians over the past half-century.

Last year, 129 Nobel laureates signed a declaration warning of the growing threat of nuclear weapons use. This year, that risk has increased further as arms control agreements have collapsed, and that means we should all be concerned. Every nation should be taking steps to support non-proliferation and disarmament. AUKUS points in the opposite direction.

Third, Australia has agreed by treaty to manage and dispose of all spent fuel and radioactive waste from its AUKUS submarines, including highly enriched uranium in their reactors. But we still do not know how or where.

After 6 decades, neither the United States nor the United Kingdom has a permanent disposal site for spent submarine fuel. And 10 years ago, the nuclear waste proposal that followed from the South Australian Royal Commission into the nuclear fuel cycle failed to win community support. That is salutary. Any plan to dispose of highly enriched uranium waste in Australia will be unacceptable for many Australians.

The views of the Australians we heard from, young people, their mums and dads, and First Australians, are very clear, as Peter has said. They are concerned about nuclear issues. Many of them have come to realise that AUKUS is all about nuclear issues, the waste from the submarine program, and the rotation of the American-British nuclear-powered submarines through Western Australia, American submarines that could in future carry nuclear weapons.

Our community thinks something needs to be done about it. And I say again, the AUKUS submarine plan is not tenable. It's time for our government to take the lead on this matter. Scrap the AUKUS submarine plan now and rebuild national security decision-

making processes, the developmental work and community consultation that we need to produce a comprehensive national security strategy. We need a strategy for Australia based on a whole-of-nation approach to guide us into the future, and such a strategy would provide a sound basis for policy.

When I was a young officer, I worked with my bosses on a Navy program to acquire a new aircraft carrier to replace the ageing HMAS Melbourne. The program had been keenly debated under the Fraser governments before the Hawke government was elected in 1983.

Within 2 weeks of taking office, the Hawke government scrapped the carrier program. That is leadership. It then reviewed Australia's strategic position through a new lens and built a new defence force around contemporary and prospective strategic needs.

The DIB review of 1986 and the 1987 Defence White Paper are examples of the kind of work we need to do now. And this work is urgent.

To be clear, we support submarines as part of our present and future force structure. But before we can decide what future submarines Australia needs, we must decide what we need them to do. And only then look at sensible options.

So, what are we seeking to achieve? What are we seeking to protect against? What dangers must we prepare for? Where are we vulnerable? And how should diplomacy, economic policy, intelligence, defence, and national resilience work together for national security matters? And how do we set priorities between the impacts of climate change and man-made existential threats?

These questions must be answered in public by a government that is prepared to explain [candidly] to the community and they should not be left to Washington and London to answer for us.

Answering them would also force the question AUKUS has never addressed: what are these submarines for? If the real answer is hunting Chinese submarines near China's home bases or escorting huge American carrier battle groups, the government should say so and explain why those missions serve Australia.

Ending the submarine plan does not end our need for submarines. We must keep a credible capability under full Australian command and control while we properly evaluate a replacement for Collins. And we must safeguard our capacity to decide for ourselves.

Sovereignty is not ownership of a submarine or a flag above a base. It is the ability of an Australian government to decide and act in Australia's interests, including when our allies would prefer that we did not.

The test is whether we can say yes. That may look easy, but it will be hard. The test is whether we can say no, and that is likely to be the toughest decision any Australian government has to make.

I have fewer years ahead of me than those left behind. Younger Australians will live with these choices far longer than I will. We owe them more than assurances. We owe them an honest account of the dangers and the alternatives, and we owe them accountability for the decisions being made in their name.

Please do two things. Please read the report. And secondly, ask your Member of Parliament where they stand in respect of AUKUS and quiz them if necessary.

Thank you.