



AUKUS Public Inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the AUKUS Public Inquiry. My name is Jessie Price; I am the Community Independent candidate for Bean, ACT.

Given the scale of taxpayer investment and the long-term strategic implications for Australia, an Inquiry is long overdue. Many Australians, including those in the electorate of Bean, hold legitimate concerns about AUKUS' lack of transparency and accountability. Concerns range from the potential erosion of national sovereignty and the extent of our future obligations under the arrangements, through to the potential of nuclear-powered submarines to heighten rather than mitigate our security risks – and the real potential for this technology to be obsolete in the time it takes for us to receive it. An exorbitant financial commitment has been made at a time of actual looming threats – including climate change, AI surveillance and cyber security attacks – that demand urgent resourcing and policy focus. The intergenerational cost of the agreement, in monetary, environmental and security consequences, reinforces the importance of this Inquiry. Robust scrutiny, clear disclosure of costs and risks, and meaningful public engagement are essential to assess whether this agreement supports the long-term interests of Australians.

What threat is AUKUS addressing? Is it our greatest risk?

There is lack of clarity around the rationale for acquiring the Virginia-class submarines, a class that is designed for 'fast-attack and stealthy undersea warfare'. Australians have been told that this is to respond to a more dangerous strategic environment; that submarines will boost deterrence, replace our ageing fleet and help maintain a 'free and open' Indo-Pacific in the face of 'regional security challenges' - without necessarily naming China but clearly implying it. At the same time, however, China is our largest trading partner. It would clearly appear to be in both countries' interests to maintain a strong and stable relationship. While Australia should have a capable and flexible defence force, fully resourced to defend our territory, a strategy involving nuclear-powered submarines would seem to risk increasing tension across all our Pacific neighbours rather than lessening it.

This raises the question of whether Australia's interests would be better served by investing in stronger regional relationships, diplomacy, and cooperative security rather than by increasing our own capacity to project force. There is also a concern that AUKUS will draw Australia more tightly into US conflicts that many Australians do not support, and the presence of US and UK nuclear submarines in Australia would further increase our risk as a military target. Polling for The Australia Institute has found that 59 per cent of those polled believe the country's interests are better served by a more independent foreign policy rather than a closer alliance with, in particular, the United States.

Experts argue that the greatest long-term security threat Australia faces is climate change, not a conventional military invasion. On that basis, Australia's security planning must recognise the



impact of climate change on food and water security. Climate-driven extreme heat, drought, fire and floods are already undermining the resilience of our economy, infrastructure and ecosystems. Projections show intensifying pressure on agricultural production, rising food prices and increasingly fragile supply chains. Increasing water scarcity across river basins and our northern regions threatens drinking water and irrigation systems that communities rely on, creating the conditions for social disruption and internal instability. The impact of climate change is also likely to drive regional migration from the increasingly climate -affected equatorial regions to the south: Australia. It should also be noted that the Australian Government is continuing to approve expansion of coal and gas projects -contributing to the climate crisis in ways that are inconsistent with the evidence-based findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Prioritising AUKUS without treating climate risk as at least an equivalent, and arguably greater, security threat represents a dangerous misalignment of resources and focus, leaving Australians exposed to a much more likely and far-reaching threat to our safety and wellbeing. Australians may be better served by directing AUKUS funds toward climate resilience, including the energy transition, flood protection, bushfire preparedness, water and agriculture security, and upgraded infrastructure. Investing in resilience would deliver immediate public benefit, strengthen national security in a genuine sense, and leave future generations with safer, more liveable communities rather than long-term liabilities.

Did the development of AUKUS bypass democracy?

The AUKUS agreement represents one of the largest and longest-running defence and financial commitments in Australia's history, yet it has been developed with only limited parliamentary scrutiny and minimal opportunity for genuine public debate. Current and future governments are being bound to significant expenditure over multiple decades. However the Parliament was not given the opportunity to properly investigate the assumptions, alternatives, or long-term implications. This would appear to be inconsistent with the principles of responsible, democratic government.

Serious concerns also arise from the structure of the deal, under which Australia is required to make very substantial payments to support US and UK shipbuilding industries without any firm guarantee that any submarines will be delivered on time (or at all). A UK parliamentary committee has acknowledged that US submarine production rates are 'a matter of concern' and 'a potential risk' to AUKUS timelines. The fact that an independent, crowd-funded AUKUS public inquiry has been launched to ask whether Australia will receive the submarines it pays for (among a set of highly pertinent Inquiry questions) highlights that AUKUS has effectively bypassed proper parliamentary scrutiny and public consent.

Is Australia putting a lot of expensive eggs into one basket?

Australia has made a commitment to extraordinarily expensive submarines at a time when the nature of warfare is changing rapidly. The key question is whether the most costly defence project in our history is the best technology to protect Australians.



Over the next 30 to 40 years, the strategic and technological environment is likely to change significantly. By the time these submarines are delivered and domestic shipbuilding fully established, today's technology could already be obsolete. With Australia's vast coastline, it is reasonable to ask whether a more agile, defensive strategy would better serve our needs than high-end, offensive capability. Rapid innovation in drone warfare, as seen in Ukraine, highlights how quickly military technology can evolve – and raises the prospect that undersea systems may follow a similar trajectory. While I am not a defence expert, these are precisely the trade-offs the Australian public deserves to have clearly explained. The Government should not cloak this information in secrecy – regional powers, such as China, are unlikely to learn anything from increased transparency that they do not already know.

The scale of AUKUS magnifies the opportunity costs. It may have displaced more affordable and adaptable capabilities, including shorter-range submarines, unmanned undersea systems, long-range strike options, and enhanced maritime surveillance – alternatives potentially better aligned with Australia's geography. This Inquiry should examine whether such options were adequately considered, including whether Australia has foregone the opportunity to acquire a larger fleet of lower-cost submarines suited to shallow and coastal operations.

Where will the spent fuel from the nuclear submarines go? What will it cost?

There are a number of unanswered questions about the disposal of the radioactive spent fuel rods. No detailed disposal pathway or costings have yet been disclosed to the Australian public. While it has been stated by the Government that all radioactive waste from the future submarine fleet will be managed domestically on defence land, it also concedes that 'no decision has been made' on a location and that further technical work and consultation are required. This is an unanswered question of great significance, given that the radioactive waste will remain hazardous for millennia.

To date, Australia has been unable to secure a permanent facility for comparatively lower-risk nuclear-medicine waste. International experience shows that identifying an appropriate deep geological site for high-level waste, undertaking rigorous environmental and cultural assessment, negotiating consent with affected communities and Traditional Owners, then designing and constructing a repository, typically spans many decades. Yet the government is continuing with the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines before confirming a clear, costed, consultative plan for the spent fuel.

What other opportunities are Australians missing out on?

The substantial cost of AUKUS should weigh heavily in any assessment of the Agreement. The opportunity to better prepare Australia for climate change has been noted above. However, the cost of AUKUS necessarily means taxpayer money is not available for other critical investments in the quality of life of Australians. At a time when younger generations are under increasing pressure and home ownership is out of reach for many, with an ageing population putting an



even greater tax burden on younger earners – we must look to increase available revenue to support the next generations of Australians to have hope and purpose, an ability to meaningfully contribute to the country, with a return of a decent quality of life for that effort.

Diverting scarce skilled labour and public investment into shipyards and submarines means delaying, reducing or abandoning infrastructure and support programs for housing, health, disability, aged care and education. It puts those needs aside in favour of a military agreement that has mixed support, rather than clear national consensus.

In summary, the government must justify continuing with this enormous cost to the Australian people in the face of clear and compelling reasons to stop. The case has not been made to Parliament, let alone to the Australian people, for diverting such an extraordinary level of funding away from essential services and support into technology that risks obsolescence, imposes intergenerational debt, and creates hazardous waste without any credible long-term plan. This is an unjustified gamble with public money and the nation's future.

Yours sincerely,

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