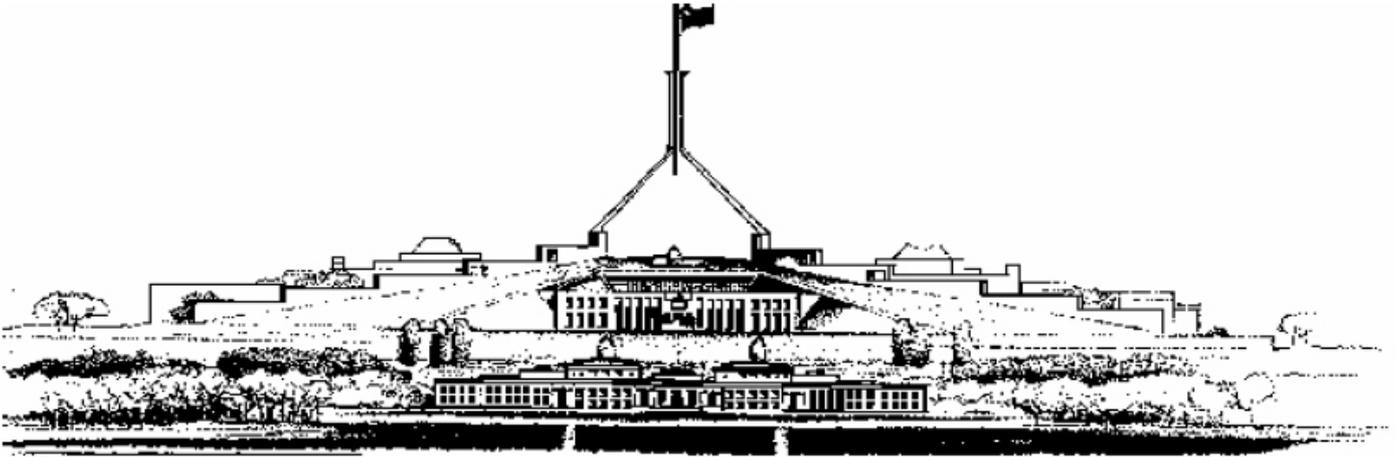




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

## PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



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BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

### An address to the House by Senator Joyce Bernard of Queensland

**Mr. Bernard. (QLD— Leader of the Opposition) (2.15pm)** - The names of historic conflicts in Australian history are important to us all. They are the names that have become monuments in our spoken language that invoke the thoughts of sacrifice and courage they represent. We speak in deserved reverence of Gallipolis, the Kokoda Trail, Tobruk, Korea and Vietnam; wars and campaigns among many that

are iconic ANZAC engagements and experiences.

One day each year involves the whole of Australia in solemn ceremonies of remembrance, gratitude and national pride for all our men and women who have fought and died in all these wars. That day is ANZAC Day - 25 April.

Sadly and despite these ordeals history repeats itself and unfortunately we once again

find ourselves building new epitaphs to remember those struck down defending all of us. These epitaphs carry the names of those who have made the greatest sacrifice in the defence of our nation. They may be family or mates, but most importantly, fellow Australians to us all. Today we gather in this house to remember the episode officially referred to as the Great Australian Emergency. As the sun goes down we will remember the people and the place names of where these Australians and many others fell in this battle, place names like Vostok Station, the Great Southern Ocean and the Timor Strait – grave yards all of them.

I stand here today still stunned by how and how quickly we got to this point. One day we are best mates with a country and the next day we are shooting live munitions at them. Some people suggest that you cannot always foresee these things, but in the Queensland vernacular I say that's bullshit. The footprints leading to this catastrophe were on the ground and visible years before the event. The failure was a systemic belief by an establishment that had forgotten the big wars and truly did not believe that such an event could occur again. Subsequently we never took the threat seriously nor did we prepare for the worst.

But to understand what really happened we need to review this conflict from every angle. Frankly, I think we enjoyed some real luck and something else. I had no idea when I began this inquest what I was to discover. Aside from the appalling loss of life, in the midst of this battle something extraordinary was happening, almost too unbelievable to mention. Unfortunately this

is still part of a secure brief, but in the due course of time will be revealed.

I can say without reservation I think our defence services today have no equal and have proven so against numerically superior adversaries. In a few days I will pay tribute that fact. But at the same time there is a burden I carry because while recognising this I am unable to give gratitude to some very extraordinary individuals who were key in our salvation.

“Lest we forget” I do not quote this lightly. I want to ensure that we can prevent or mitigate such events in the future by remembering. I now refer to the report on the Australian Emergency which is due out next week and something else. I offer this in a bi partisan effort – because we were all contributors to this war, left, right middle and green, but lets get to the report.

The AEC report is a lengthy document, thousands of pages encompassing everything from resource security to religion. It is quick to point out that the events of last year (2015) might have not happened or may have been greatly diminished if Australia had been willing, able to, or had not mismanaged the needs to protect its sovereignty. In addition, Australia's apparent friendship with China blinded our politicians to Chinas lust for energy, a need that surpassed its need for us. All of the parties were guilty of this.

The aggressor states; as our government now describes them, had already decided that Australia was unable to defend claimed territorial interests. The report claims the ADF's force mix was transparent in its inability to defend the countries interests. This left the door open to aggressor states to prosecute agendas they

believed to be in their national interest (Because they believed they could win and we were incapable) at our expense. We paid for that mistake with over a million lives. Where did that mistake stem from?

It's well accepted that the greatest failure in the SO (Southern Ocean) and INTM (Indonesia/Timor) conflicts was air power. While our opposing forces were not seeking the complete annihilation of Australia, that moment arrived anyway.

I would like to draw member's attention to the most scathing comments regarding decisions made in the previous decade detailing failed leadership decisions. These were decisions based on politics and not the interest of Australian security. Had it not been for the insight and persistence of just a handful of individuals with the ability to understand strategic reach, I believe I would not be standing here today.

The Australian Emergency (AEC) report is broken into several parts; firstly what led to the crisis in Antarctica and then the war with Indonesia. My party recognises the first conflict enabled the other. The AEC also recognises this; however, I want to dig into a few other areas.

Australian governments and specifically ministers make decisions that often mean life and death. However, they know they are off the hook after they retire and are not accountable for their decisions. Some of these people in the past have made terrible decisions, purely selfish deliberations that have resulted in the deaths of untold Australians. These people should face trial.

The AEC report details the initial decision making processes on Australia's air capability in 2007. Even then it had been strongly debated that Australia's acquisition of the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet and subsequently the F-35 JSF committed Australia to an era of huge uncertainty and inferior air capability. At the time it was known that Australia's F-111 fleet could be kept flying for five years beyond their intended retirement date, to 2015 or better. Obviously this didn't happen.

In hindsight, a cursory look at our JSF and the Super Hornet systems reveals critical vulnerabilities, which in the context of operations within our region were easily and inexpensively exploited by our adversaries. Such exploitation translated into the collapse of our air combat capability and an Australian war, leaving the defence of our nation completely compromised.

By 2011, this poorly thought out purchasing decision became very self-evident but with no immediate solution. The timelines between acquisition and operation of the F/A-18E/F systems had been long, and the F-35 program had struck major problems, the least of which was massive price escalations as a result of deep US cuts into its own acquisition program. At the same time, Australia's neighbors had enjoyed strong economic growth coupled with a more outward and strategic interest in the region. The new wealth meant they were more able to buy capable weapons systems from China and Russia, which they did. Subsequently we found ourselves driving aircraft that were outclassed. At a critical moment in the nation's

security, we had to deal with a crippled air combat capability.

To a whole lot of people at the time, this was no surprise; Indonesia had long been a close study of Australian defence. By 2010 the TNI's acquisition program was strongly reflecting its desire to meet regional capabilities in contrast to its long time pre-occupation with internal threats. Australia's commitment to the F-35 and F/A-18E/F platforms prior to 2010 provided the TNI the roadmap they needed to develop a strategy and capability that would eventually exceed their own expectations. Once they knew what we were doing, the hard part was over.

The failure therefore was so not just bad acquisitions; but also a complete lack of threat appreciation. Ten years ago it seems our defence planner's fashioned Australia's air combat capabilities not for what 'might happen' but what 'might not happen'. Australia's air combat capability pre 2010 drew from some severely flawed threat analysis.

1. Indonesia would not field effective SAM systems
2. Our tanker aircraft could operate with invulnerability
3. Our neighbors wouldn't purchase aircraft capable of defeating the Super Hornet or JSF.
4. Indonesia would always be friendly or militarily incapable - an incompetent assumption.
5. The Chinese would not have any interest in this part of the world.
6. We would have no heavy- long range strike requirement from our own shore.

7. The threat of nuclear or biological weapons from states friendly to Indonesia or regional terrorist groups would not materialize.

Defence planning circa 2007 got all of these wrong. They also got the Islamic threat wrong. They clearly did not foresee and subsequent to the fact they still underestimated the results from the conquest by Extreme Islamism of Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, parts of Thailand the Phillipines and every other country with a Muslim majority. It seems that while the man on the street saw this coming, our defence planners were blind.

In hindsight, anybody with a shred of common sense can see that the planners in 2007 and before built a security model based on a house of shaky and hopeful cards, essentially wishing and planning for the best. The ease with which Australia's future air combat capability (based on F-35 and F/A-18E/F) was neutralized is now almost too painful to revisit.

Hopefully with this experience we will now plan for crises that may never occur but we will be prepared. Remember, there will be a next time, there always is, but each second generation forgets.