

## **Defence Procurement - Submarines**

**Australian Senate 3 December 2014 Hansard**

**Senator DAY (South Australia):** My question is to the Minister for Defence, Senator Johnston.

Informed Defence opinion tells us that Australia needs a minimum of six conventional diesel-electric submarines and six nuclear submarines to replace the current Collins class submarine fleet.

The minister has previously said that our future submarine fleet has to be regionally dominant and superior.

Given the superior range, speed and capability of nuclear submarines, and that a number of our G20 colleagues have full nuclear submarine capabilities, will the government commission a feasibility study into including nuclear submarines in our future submarine fleet?

**Minister David Johnston:** I thank Senator Day for this question and for his op-ed on 16 October—I congratulate him on that piece of commentary.

The Future Submarine program is, as I am sure the senator knows, the most significant investment in defence capability that is coming over the horizon for Australia.

It is extremely important that we get this right, particularly when we are starting from scratch.

The government is committed to delivering the most capable replacement submarines for Collins at the best price and with the least risk to our nation's future security. We owe it to our nation not to expose it to critical capability gaps that we now face because the previous government did nothing for six years on submarines, as I have said on so many occasions.

We also of course owe it to taxpayers to provide value for money.

A nuclear option is not currently coalition policy due to the significant costs and other strategic and logistical challenges we would face, given that Australia does not have, as we all know, a domestic nuclear energy generation industry. Australia currently lacks the infrastructure, training facilities, regulatory and safety systems necessary to operate and maintain nuclear powered submarines.

These would add considerably to the cost of our Future Submarine program and would take a substantial period of time to develop in order to be part of that program.

Australia also currently lacks suitably qualified and experienced personnel within our Royal Australian Navy and across industry to safely operate and sustain nuclear powered submarines. I congratulate you on commencing the debate, if that is what we are doing.

It is an important debate but it is a very expensive one.

**Senator DAY:** Mr President, given that very interesting answer, I ask a supplementary question.

The 2013 Defence and Security Cooperation Treaty with Great Britain promotes high levels of defence cooperation and interoperability.

The British Astute class submarine has a nuclear reactor motor that will actually outlast the 30-year life of the vessel.

BAE Systems, the UK's nuclear submarine builder, is already in South Australia.

Will the government explore, with the British, the merits of nuclear submarine construction?

**Senator JOHNSTON:** Again, I want to thank the senator for his interest in this important topic.

I have had the benefit of a half-day tour of an Astute class submarine at Barrow-in-Furness in the United Kingdom.

This is a phenomenal piece of strategic capability, but it is extremely expensive—several billion euro, several billion pounds.

Literally two generations of nuclear experience have gone into its development. We have none of that capacity.

The debate should focus on whether we commence attaining that capacity, whether we should look at whether nuclear energy would provide to us advantages over current energy generation systems in the very long term.

With respect to South Australia, we are trying to bring forward a program cost-effectively and we are fighting schedule every day.

To introduce this would simply delay the program.

**Senator DAY:** Mr President, I ask a further supplementary question.

Former Chief of Navy, then Vice Admiral Ray Griggs, told *Monthly* magazine that: "Our submarines provide us with strategic weight in a way that no other ADF asset ... does."

Given that weight, will the government consider, or commence considering, establishing a separate fourth arm of our defence forces—that is, separate from the Navy—called the Royal Australian Submarine Corps?

**Senator JOHNSTON:** Again, I thank the senator for his question.

The consideration of whether we would stovepipe and compartmentalise submarine output and submarine strategic capability has been considered within Defence, to the best of my knowledge, for some time.

Given current interoperation between surface and air assets, it is seen that the cohesion between the various dimensions of platforms—subsurface, surface and air—requires that we not go down the path of creating a separate compartment for our submarine capability.

What we need is a cohesive operational force element group in the nature of submarines that works with our ships and our planes and cohesively provides management of the battle space as the one cohesive unit.