

Adelaide Conference Surfaces \$20 billion Submarine Issue

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In a critical move for the National debate on the Future Australian Submarine Project, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) National President, Air Vice Marshal Brent Espeland (Rtd), suggests an agenda for a national debate on building the next generation submarines in Australia and has called for a National Conference to air the issues for 24-26 March 2015. “This debate needs to inform the public on the issues of one of the biggest defence programs in our history” AVM Espeland said. It needs to happen, the timing is right and Adelaide is the appropriate venue for historical, political, economic and public interest reasons.

The Federal Government is due to make a further announcement on the sub program shortly and we know that the media and the political commentary relating to the Collins Class has not been a balanced one. It is important for the discourse to be informed, in a balanced and non-selective way and encompass all the issues from capabilities, through sovereignty, alliances, reliance, access to design and other risks, defence industry, the relevance of hull worthiness, economic value and finally, to people and skills. One of our most important strategic defence issues and one that we know from the 2015 Defence White Paper Consultation

Process that the Australian public are seeking the full story.

Hargraves Institute Advocate for SA, Mark Ryan, a retired Wing Commander from a Maritime Patrol and acoustics intelligence background had a 25-year relationship with the submarine force. “I lived through the Collins Class building program and witnessed the growing pains of DSTO, industry and the Navy in trying to get our first of class submarine build right”. “The public only get to hear one side of the story,” Ryan says, the public does not hear of the patrols, the operational and strategic missions that our submariners successfully undertake. The public only hears the dud sub media barrage of whenever anything goes wrong, it hits the press and in a big way. I can assure you that our submarine force has one of the highest standings in the international submarine world and the boats cut the mustard when they have to. Ryan is a strong advocate for making sure that the new future submarine option provides the best operational capability for Australian submariners and is the best decision for Australia.

The submarine is a countries’ most valued strategic asset, especially, if it is perceived by other countries to be highly operational and lethal, just as the Collins Class is in our arena of operations. Dr John Bruni of SAGE International, one of Australia’s leading commentators on our defence and strategic issues understands that the public is not seeing a balanced argument on the debate on how our government of the day should proceed with deciding where and

what type of submarine should be Australia's next strategic platform.

South Australian industry has the most to gain and lose by the decision of where to build. The overriding factor, according to Ryan, is that the platform must be the most capable and most operational that Australia can achieve in design and operational ability. We must understand that there is no submarine in the world that currently meets Australia's unique operational requirements. To replace the Collins Class we need a brand new design, incorporating all the lessons learnt from the Collins experience and that of other submarine operators. We also need the assistance of our allies in making sure that the weapons systems and electronic gadgetry is the best fit for what we aim to achieve in our submarine.

What is the impact upon the Australian ship building and manufacturing sector if our \$20 billion dollars is spend totally overseas on an off the shelf system as opposed to building it in Australia with our skilled workforce, our ship yards and our industry? This will be one of the most difficult decisions the federal government will have to make. It is one that they must get right, and it is one that must sit well with the people of Australia. Presently, the political debate has been very one sided and although complex it has not been balanced nor has it been right. Some of our commentators cannot comment. We have not heard from the ASC, nor have we heard from some of our elite submarine captains and crew.

The people of Australia need to know, they need a public forum, a national discussion on these very important issues so that they understand the significance of this issue and the importance of the process that is going to be taken by government and that they are getting it right.

Submarines are lethal, they are extremely difficult to find and they pop up in the most unusual and most delicate of situations. In most cases no one even knows they have been there or that they are there. This is a strategic asset that has the highest value in the defence armoury and we need the best that our money can buy.

The public have a right to understand the issues at play here, AVM Espeland says, the RUSI is one body whose charter is to keep the public informed of defence matters and I can think of no other more pressing issue than the future of Australia's Submarine Force. Let's have a conference, let's have it in Adelaide and let's ensure it provides a balanced view of the issues at hand. It is the very least the public expect.

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –