

Labor Rushes Through a Bill to Exempt AUKUS Nuclear Submarines from Environmental Protections

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Asia-Pacific Research, May 24, 2023

[Green Left](#) 23 May 2023

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Defence](#), [Environment](#)

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Labor has a bill before parliament which, if passed, would exempt nuclear plants on nuclear-propelled submarines from two other important laws — the [Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Act 1998](#) and the [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999](#).

The [Defence Legislation Amendment \(Naval Nuclear Propulsion\) Bill 2023](#) aims to insert a paragraph into these two laws to exempt “a naval nuclear propulsion plant related to use in a conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarine” from the “requirements” of each of them when they refer to “nuclear power plants”.

This is not only alarming, it is illogical to make a distinction between controls and protections on a nuclear plant providing power to propel conventionally-armed, nuclear-powered submarines and a land-based nuclear power plant: it is still a nuclear power plant.

In fact, a nuclear power plant on a submarine needs the same, or more, protection requirements as a nuclear power plant on land.

The uranium which will be used in the proposed SSN (a hull classification system denoting nuclear-powered submarines) is enriched to the level used in nuclear weapons.

It is more dangerous to the naval staff than conventional uranium-fired nuclear power plants, as they live and work in very close proximity to the nuclear power plant powering the submarine.

When docked in a port, residents living nearby are exposed to the toxic impact of possible radiation leaks from the submarine's nuclear power plant.

If passed, the amendments to exempt a nuclear power plant on board a nuclear-propelled submarine from the safety requirements of these two Acts amount to a betrayal of naval staff operating the submarines and the wider public especially those living close to the ports servicing these lethal weapons.

Members of parliament have never been given an opportunity to discuss or vote on joining the trilateral AUKUS security treaty which allowed for the nuclear-powered submarine technology is to be transferred to Australia.

It has never been given an opportunity to discuss the decision to buy and/or acquire nuclear-propelled submarines.

Here is one — possibly the only — opportunity for MPs to voice their opinion on one aspect of the nuclear-propelled submarine aspect of AUKUS.

The Senate has referred this dangerous bill to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee. It will report by June 9.

It was only introduced and read on May 10 and submissions to the inquiry close on May 26. The government is clearly trying to get its dangerous amendments through with as little discussion as possible.

You can send your [opposition submission here](#).

There are many reasons this bill is irresponsible and must be opposed.

1. The AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines are to be deployed in a hunter-killer role, and would be subject to enemy attack. A torpedo attack on a nuclear-powered submarine would release toxic radiation from the power plant and its enriched uranium fuel: this toxic pollution would remain for generations to come.
2. It is authoritarian to minimise public and parliamentary discussion about such a move.
3. It is irresponsible because the AUKUS nuclear-propelled submarines depend on US technology to be built as well as for their maintenance and operation.
4. This means that Labor's alignment to US foreign policy will have to be maintained to gain and maintain access to this technology. This means Australia loses the ability to make decisions in the best interests of its people.
5. It may well draw Australia into a US war against China, which will lead to economic distress not just for us but the nations and peoples of the Indo-Pacific region.
6. Australia is not under military threat from China, or any other country; it does not need nuclear-propelled hunter-killer submarines — designed for forward deployment.
7. The huge cost — \$368 billion with substantial blow-outs expected — means less ability to address serious social needs including public housing, hospitals, education, nurses and teachers and transitioning to renewable energy.

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Featured image: Green Left with a BAE Systems image of a design for an AUKUS nuclear-powered submarine.

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