



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Federation Chamber**

**BILLS**

**Defence Legislation Amendment  
(Woomera Prohibited Area) Bill 2014**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 16 July 2014**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Snowdon, Warren, MP

**Source** House  
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**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Mr SNOWDON** (Lingiari) (10:39): I am pleased to be able to make a contribution to this debate. I want to thank the people in the Library for their *Bills Digest* which gives us all the information we need to be able to make a meaningful contribution. It is a technical piece of legislation which opens up for other uses the Woomera Prohibited Area. The bill provides for the making of the Woomera Prohibited Area rules by the minister which will include, amongst other things, zones which are to be demarcated within that area. It creates a permit system for access to and use by non-Defence users of the Woomera Prohibited Area. It introduces offences and penalties for entering the Woomera Prohibited Area without permission, for failing to comply with the conditions of a permit, and provides for compensation for acquisition of property from a person otherwise than on just terms that results from the operation of the new part VIB of the Defence Act 1903.

I want to talk about an example of what the Woomera Prohibited Area can actually facilitate. I was sadly and very unfortunately given my marching orders out of this place by the people of the Northern Territory in 1996 for a relatively short period of time. I was back again in 1998. During the intervening period, one of the jobs I had was working with a legal firm and a company called Kistler Aerospace, negotiating native title over Woomera on their behalf so that they could launch rockets from Woomera. The idea was to have rockets which would be returned to earth. Sadly, it never eventuated, but it demonstrated to me the enormous value of this property in terms of defence and other interests, and there was its special location in terms of space programs. As a former minister in the defence portfolio, I am aware of the use of the Woomera Prohibited Area for research purposes. I could name a number of research programs that have been held there. A very important capacity for the Australian nation is provided by this Woomera Prohibited Area.

This bill is designed to open up the capacity of the area to be used by other users and to facilitate, potentially, access to its mineral wealth most particularly. But I think the people of Australia need to understand that here we have a real jewel in developing our defence capacity and our national security. I do not think it is commonly understood. I want to pay tribute to the people in Defence who have the responsibility of managing and administering this particular area.

As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, I live in Alice Springs, which is a little bit up the road. It is common ground, in a sense. As you know, if you fire rockets out of Woomera and they head north, they will come across, potentially, south-east Queensland or the Northern Territory. What happens at Woomera could eventually impact upon communities right across northern Australia, but most particularly, in my case, in the Northern Territory.

There has been a long history of engagement with the community by defence over this Woomera Prohibited Area. It is the largest overland, long-range weapons testing facility in the world, having been operational since 1947, and it covers 127,000 square kilometres of northern South Australia. It is no small bit of property, but, like other parts of Australia which are being used for defence purposes—and I speak of ranges in the Northern Territory used principally for the Army, but also for the Air Force and potentially for the Navy—these areas are of great value to us. I think that, when we are having discussions around our national security and the development of options for our national security, we need to understand the importance of these areas of land and the need to look after them properly in the first instance, to make sure we are good environmental guardians, to make sure we are good neighbours to and partners with Aboriginal people who might be the traditional owners or the native title holders for those areas, and to make sure that we facilitate the use of those areas in a way which is in line with our national interest. I note that this piece of legislation does precisely that.

So I think it is a pleasing piece of legislation. I note that it was prepared during the course of the last parliament, and was developed largely in response to work which had been initiated by the former defence minister John Faulkner, who called for a review to make recommendations about the best use of the Woomera Prohibited Area in the national interest. The final report of that review of the prohibited area—which was undertaken by Dr Allan Hawke, a former very senior public servant and adviser to former governments out of the Defence portfolio—was published on 4 February 2011 and made 65 recommendations. Within its numerous recommendations

it outlined a coexistence model so that, whilst Defence maintained primacy over the WPA, non-Defence users would have clarity regarding their access to specified areas of operation incorporating both the available location and time of use.

Recommendation 14 suggested the division of the WPA into three zones: a red zone for exclusive Defence use, an amber zone for regular defence use and a green zone for occasional defence use. By implementing a zonal timeshare arrangement, Defence was able to allocate exclusion windows throughout the year limiting the non-Defence use of the prohibited area. And that makes sense because, as I say, it is 127,000 square kilometres—it is a large area of land—and, whilst there are parts of that property which could not be and should not be used by other users, there are other parts of the property where people should be able to have access to that use.

I go back to the issue of Woomera being used as a rocket-launching facility, for example. Had that proceeded, it would have meant Australia getting access to technology for rocket launching which it currently does not have. It would have meant Australia getting access to technology, via the United States, in terms of a launch facility that would have been unique to us. Sadly it did not proceed but, nevertheless, it just shows that this property is of great intrinsic value and that we need to make sure that it is used for the purpose for which the Commonwealth acquired it in 1947 and has used it since then. But at the same time we need to understand that there is not necessarily any essential conflict between that primary purpose and the objectives of providing other people with the capacity to use it.

I note that the shadow minister and his contribution in the main chamber talked about Woomera Prohibited Area overlapping a major part of South Australia's potential for significant minerals and energy resources, including 30 per cent of the Gawler Craton, one of the world's major mineral domains; and the Arckaringa, Officer, and Eromanga basins for hydrocarbons and coal. And, of course, we know that Olympic Dam is adjacent to the Woomera Prohibited Area and is part of the same geological formations. The South Australian government has assessed that over the next decade about \$35 billion worth of iron ore, gold, and other mineral resources are potentially exploitable from within the Woomera Prohibited Area.

That is all well and good and I hope that they are able to develop some of those resources and are able to get the value out of them. But I just want to re-emphasise the importance of this place for science and as a property to use for the development of new ways of doing business. I want to commend the work that is being done there on a continuing basis by the Defence Science and Technology Organisation. The work they do is so vital for our national interest but goes below the radar, if I might put it like that in this context. It is often and mostly unrecognised by the general community but vital to developing our national defence capacity and looking after our national security interests. This gives me an opportunity to say to those wonderful people at the Defence Science and Technology Organisation how much we value your work, how much we know that you do on our behalf through dint of your brains and by working collaboratively with people from other nations in developing new ways of doing business, exploiting new technologies and using Woomera as an integral part of that space for testing, for demonstrations and the like. I could speak on this for a long time; I know it would bore many. It does not bore me—though perhaps I could put myself to sleep, and people say I often should. Nevertheless, I do want to applaud the government for bringing forward this legislation and putting it through the parliament. It is an important piece of legislation, but I do want to make sure that we emphasise the vital national interests that we have in this Woomera Prohibited Area.