Mr RUDDOCK (Berowra) (10:13): On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade I present the committee’s report of its inquiry into the death penalty, entitled *A world without the death penalty: Australia’s advocacy for the abolition of the death penalty*.

Report made a parliamentary paper in accordance with standing order 39(e).

Mr RUDDOCK: by leave—I can genuinely say that this may be my last speech in this chamber. And, having just heard me on another matter, members may know that I do have passion about some issues. I am passionate about achieving a world without the death penalty. I have been chair of the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, and I was certainly pleased to be able to conclude a report in a timely way entitled *A world without the death penalty: Australia’s advocacy for the abolition of capital punishment*.

Ideally, this inquiry should not be necessary. Ideally, we would live in a world where the death penalty was relegated to the dark pages of history. Sadly, this is not the case. Indeed, the need for Australia to take stock of the situation and solidify our efforts for global abolition has never been more pressing. This inquiry was undertaken with a view to determining what role Australia might play in the global movement towards abolition; how we, as an abolitionist country, might play a role in reducing the number of executions globally and best assist retentionist nations on the pathway toward abolition.

In 1977, only 16 countries had abolished the death penalty. Today, a majority of countries have abolished it in law or in practice, with four countries last year making the transition to abolitionist. While 2015 marked the first time that a majority of countries were abolitionist, it also recorded an increase in executions carried out. Of all executions recorded in 2015, 89 per cent were carried out in just three countries: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. I might say that there are others who do not report the numbers that they execute, and in some cases they may be even larger. However, the United States of America has found itself in the unenviable list of countries carrying out the most recorded executions, even though, as I have said, China and North Korea are both suspected of having carried out far more. I regret that, as recently as this week, media reporting suggests that a country, or perhaps countries, in our region may also be considering a resumption of executions. Were that to be so, it would be most regrettable.

The application of the death penalty is not limited to hardened criminals guilty of the most serious crimes. Indeed, the list of those executed or under sentence of death includes people with intellectual disabilities and juvenile offenders, and in many cases people were sentenced following trials that did not meet international fair standards of trial. Of those sentenced in recent times, some have been found guilty of apostasy, blasphemy, homosexuality, witchcraft or adultery—let me say, not terrorism and not murders. The death penalty is never carried out in a way that could be deemed to be humane, with some even being sentenced to death by stoning.

Last year, 2015, marked the sad occasion where Australian convicted drug smugglers Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran were executed in Indonesia. This event sadly focused the minds of many Australians on the issue of the death penalty, and left many wondering what we, as a nation, might do to eliminate this barbarous practice. I am pleased that the government has sought to answer this question by referring this inquiry to the committee that I have chaired, and through its other activities. We can be proud of Australia’s advocacy for abolition, but there is more that we can and should do.

The report that I am presenting to the parliament today comprises thirteen recommendations. After many months of public hearings, private meetings, in-depth research and consultation, the committee has arrived at these recommendations as a way that Australia can effectively drive change. Included in the committee’s report is a recommendation to develop a whole-of-government strategy for abolition. This includes changes to the way in which we share information internationally, developing a coordinated strategy document for dealing with...
individual cases, developing a strategy for international abolition efforts, undertaking much needed research and analysis, advocating for transparency, and augmenting the work already undertaken by other nations.

In developing a formal strategy, we will join the United Kingdom and Norway, who are actively advocating for abolition internationally. The committee also recommends that Australia plays an ongoing leading role in the abolition movement, including the World Congress Against the Death Penalty. Recommendations outlined in this report are realistic and practical.

While it is inappropriate for the committee to opine how broad recommendations may be pursued, I believe that in any consideration of priorities we should include powerful international influence. For instance, if the United States, our closest ally, were to change its policy, I think it would present a powerful argument for many others to follow.

Australia has a strong voice on the global stage, and our ability to coordinate our approach with other influential partners may well be beneficial.

I do thank all the witnesses who made themselves available to this inquiry. I particularly note the involvement of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian Federal Police, and the Attorney-General's Department. I am grateful to foreign governments for their willingness to assist this inquiry and for the dedication of organisations including Amnesty International, Reprieve, Human Rights Law Centre, Australians Against Capital Punishment, Human Rights Watch, Parliamentarians for Global Action and the World Coalition Against the Death Penalty, along with many other organisations who have contributed.

Having campaigned against the death penalty for all of my time since entering this place some 42½ years ago, it seems fitting that I am able to present this report as the sun sets on my parliamentary career. Somebody else must have written that for me! I am honoured to do so. I thank the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop, for this reference and her keen and ongoing interest in Australia's effort to abolish the death penalty. I thank particularly my colleagues whom I have waved at formally before, who have played a key role in this inquiry: my colleague the member for Fowler, Chris Hayes, who has co-chaired Parliamentarians against the Death Penalty, and my retiring colleague the member for Fremantle, Melissa Parke. For their dedicated work, I thank the staff of the joint standing committee, including Vikki Darrough, Nathan Fewkes, Sonya Fladun and Emma Banyer, led ably by our committee clerk, who is hiding behind there, Jerome Brown, whom I acknowledge as the leader.

He ensured that we were able to do this report in a timely way; he is, with his team, extraordinarily professional, and I do want to thank them. I also acknowledge my staff member Ross Macdonald for his work. It may not be known that he worked previously with my Senate colleague and friend from the ACT previously, who played a leadership role in these matters, and he comes with a personal compassion that I know only too well.

The death penalty is barbaric. It degrades those who perpetrate it. The result is final. But, for me, the most basic principle of human rights, the right to life, should always prevail. I commend this report to the House.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Goodenough): Member for Berowra, would you mind moving that the House take note of the report?

Mr RUDDOCK: I have failed on my last day! Forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker Goodenough. With great pleasure, I move:

That the House take note of the report—

this very, very significant report.

Debate adjourned.