

Warnings Without Action

Why Australia Needs a Parliamentary Inquiry into National Resilience

Discussion summary — Institute for Integrated Economic Research – Australia

Australia does not have a knowledge problem on national resilience. It has an action problem. Across two decades, successive governments, of both major parties, have been warned, in detail and in writing, of foreseeable risks to the country's security, supply chains, and sovereign capability. The warnings have come from defence and strategic reviews, royal commissions, parliamentary committees, independent research bodies, allies, and at times from within government itself. In almost every case the warnings have been acknowledged and then left unacted upon until events forced a reactive response. The gap between knowing and doing is the problem. Closing it is what the proposed Parliamentary Inquiry into National Resilience and Preparedness is designed to do.

The pattern

The same sequence has played out across multiple domains under multiple governments: a vulnerability is identified; a report documents it and proposes remedial action; the report is acknowledged; implementation is partial, deferred, or quietly abandoned; a change of minister or government resets the policy clock; a crisis arrives; a reactive response is mounted; and a fresh inquiry is commissioned to examine what went wrong. Four short examples, one per domain:

- **Liquid fuel.** Independent reports flagged Australia's declining fuel security from 2013, and a 2015 Senate inquiry recommended a whole-of-government fuel-supply risk assessment including military disruption scenarios. By 2018, refined-fuel imports exceeded 90 per cent. The 2020 refinery subsidy was, in IIER-A's 2021 phrase, "too little, too late, and too short-sighted." The recent Strait of Hormuz disruption has now made the documented vulnerability tangible.
- **Pandemic.** COVID-19 was not a Black Swan; sovereign-manufacturing and supply-chain vulnerabilities had been flagged before 2020. Australia entered the crisis with about 25 per cent fewer hospital beds per capita than the OECD average and 9.4 ICU beds per 100,000 (Germany: 33.9). Three subsequent inquiries reached materially the same conclusions; the 2022 JSCFADT recommendation for a national resilience framework has, as at March 2026, received no formal Government Response.
- **Climate-security.** A 2018 Senate inquiry identified climate change as "a current and existential national security risk" and called for an integrated whole-of-government response. There has been no substantial whole-of-government policy response since. The 2020 Royal Commission's line, "unprecedented is not a reason to be unprepared," remains the most-quoted and least-implemented finding of recent years.
- **Defence.** Around \$695 billion of defence investment between 2007 and 2022, across some 38 defence-related ministers in 23 years, nine white papers and nine reform programs, produced a 2023 Defence Strategic Review verdict that the ADF was "not fully fit for purpose." The submarine saga is the case study within the case study: a 2009 mid-2030s requirement that, via Japanese, French and now AUKUS iterations, will not deliver a complete sovereign capability before the 2040s.

The common factor

The same underlying dynamic recurs across each domain. The federal political horizon runs three years, often shorter. National-resilience preparation runs decades. Where the two horizons conflict, the shorter one almost always wins. Six prime ministers in fifteen years, ministerial churn within portfolios, news-cycle adjudication of policy, just-in-time public policy, and a federal tendency to market success and dismiss risk-talk for short-term gain have all combined to defeat long-horizon preparation. None of these features is unique to one party. They are properties of the system within which both major parties operate.

Compounding this is the 2024 finding, accepted by the Government, that the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme has failed to achieve its intended purpose, leaving substantial cross-spectrum advocacy flows unilluminated. That is a resilience question, not a partisan one.

Why prior inquiries have not been enough

Each of the nine relevant inquiries over the past decade was scoped to a single domain. None integrated cascades across domains. None tracked implementation of its predecessors' recommendations. None examined foreign influence as a resilience question. None examined the political-cultural dimension itself as a structural problem requiring structural remedy.

What the proposed Inquiry would do differently

Four features of the proposal merit cross-spectrum support:

- (i) whole-of-nation scope integrating supply chain, sovereign capability, cognitive resilience, foreign influence, and strategic disruption;
- (ii) explicit implementation accountability, including tracking of recommendations across changes of government;
- (iii) a legislated National Resilience Framework with regular State of National Preparedness Reports tabled in Parliament — placing resilience reporting on the same standing as the budget; and
- (iv) a Senate Select Committee constituted across the ideological spectrum, so that findings can survive the next change of government.

Conclusion

Australia has been warned. The warnings have been documented. The cost of continuing to defer is not theoretical; it is being paid, in increments, every time another foreseeable disruption arrives and finds the country not ready. The question is not whether Australia can afford to commit to this Inquiry. It is whether the country can afford not to.

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Attachment:

Proposal for a Parliamentary Inquiry into National Resilience and Preparedness