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Let's face it, Australia goes to war far too easily

- Sue Wareham

The soon-to-be-released Brereton Report will shine a light on alleged war crimes committed by Australian forces in Afghanistan. It is expected that a culture of impunity within the special forces will be highlighted as a significant factor in perpetuating crimes against Afghan civilians.

However, any change that is to occur as a result of this report must not be limited to the troops themselves. It must start at the top - meaning the political decisions to send Australians to war and the impunity with which those decisions are made. And it must focus on those who are disproportionately affected and disproportionately ignored when we go to war - civilians.

When Australia decides to go to war, there are many glaring omissions in the decision-making process. This far-reaching decision is taken by, at most, a tiny handful of ministers, and in practice generally by the Prime Minister alone. Our parliament is not consulted. Many critical questions, about goals, strategy, likely duration and costs are either not asked, not answered, subject to shifting goalposts or hidden from the public - or all of these. Far from war being the proverbial "last resort", Australia enters wars remarkably easily.

A decision for war is made all the easier because civilians in the places where we fight our wars - and questions such as how many are likely to be killed, injured, displaced or orphaned, and who will look after them - barely rate a mention.

Justice Brereton has identified 55 possible breaches of the laws of war. Each of these tragic deaths leaves a wide circle of grief, often additional economic hardship for a family and, unsurprisingly, hatred for those responsible. But what of the other civilian deaths in Afghanistan from the war that Australia so enthusiastically joined in 2001?

For children, the costs of war are particularly severe. Not a single child living in Afghanistan today was born into peace.

The Costs of War project at Brown University in the United States estimates that there have been over 43,000 civilian deaths from the war in Afghanistan, and a far higher additional number whose lives have been devastated in multiple ways. Tadamichi Yamamoto, head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), says that "almost no civilian in Afghanistan [has escaped being personally affected in some way](#) by the ongoing violence."

For children, the costs of war are particularly severe. Not a single child living in Afghanistan today was born into peace. The UN Secretary-General's June 2020 report [Children and Armed Conflict](#) (reporting on the year 2019) states that, of all the conflicts around the world, the war in Afghanistan remains the deadliest for children, with a 67 per cent increase in suicide and complex attacks affecting children, outweighing a decrease in casualties from aerial attacks.

Millions of Afghans have been displaced from their homes. The Costs of War project estimates that since 2001 [at least 2.1 million Afghans have fled the country](#), and another 3.2 million have been displaced internally. They face any combination of lack of shelter, hunger, unemployment, lack of adequate healthcare, water, electricity, and sanitation. Globally, over half of the world's refugees are children.

Women also are disproportionately impacted by the conflict. UNAMA reports that it [exacerbates inequalities and discriminatory practices against them](#) and increases their exposure to sexual and gender-based violence.

By providing political, military and moral support for the war, Australia has had a hand in creating and perpetuating this 19-year-long human disaster.

Australian governments have managed the war by a combination of [misinformation and secrecy](#). The goalposts have shifted regularly, from President Bush's "smoking al-Qaeda out of their holes" to

"preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a training ground for terrorists" to "stabilising Afghanistan" to "improving the lives of the Afghan people", each one seeming to represent little more than a media sound bite.

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A string of ministerial statements over many years assured us of "progress" when there was none. The media [were very carefully managed](#) to paint an overly positive picture of the war. "Operational sensitivity" was abused to avoid disclosing the real situation.

The reliance on secrecy was taken to a new level by the criminal prosecution of military lawyer David McBride, whose "crime" was to disclose to media the Afghan War files on alleged war crimes in Afghanistan - the very subject of Brereton's report. McBride believed he had [exhausted all other avenues internally](#), including by raising his concerns with very senior military and political figures and the Australian Federal Police, to no avail. For such acts of honour and courage, he faces the possibility of life in prison. If a culture of impunity is to change, the political intimidation of whistleblowers such as McBride must cease.

When a country goes to war, we know there will be killing, maiming, psychological terror, destruction of infrastructure, waves of refugees and human rights violations, with disproportionate impacts on innocent people. There will be "the fog of war", in which particularly heinous things can happen. These are not unanticipated consequences, but part and parcel of modern war. The time to weigh up these costs is not after the event, but before a decision is made. We owe it to our troops, and to every civilian who will suffer the consequences of whatever unfolds, to get the decision right. Our current decision-making process fails appallingly on every count.

The apparent culture of impunity in our special forces must change, and the perpetrators of the atrocities reported by Justice Brereton must be held to account. But equally there is a desperate need for the culture of political impunity and secrecy to change.

Only then might we claw back an identity as a nation that values peace, rather than one that is constantly at war.

- **Dr Sue Wareham OAM is president of the Medical Association for Prevention of War and secretary of Australians for War Powers Reform.**

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/7012527/lets-face-it-australia-goes-to-war-far-too-easily/>