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This government needs to stop militarising our biggest challenges

- **Sue Wareham**

The Australian government is [planning new legislation](#) to enable the prime minister to declare a national emergency or disaster and deploy the Australian Defence Force within Australia. Bushfires and pandemics have been cited as possible triggers for such a declaration. The proposal comes in the wake of ADF personnel helping to enforce quarantine restrictions in Melbourne.

Prime Minister Morrison [stated](#) he believed there was "a clear community expectation that the Commonwealth should have the ability to respond in times of national emergencies and disasters, particularly through deployment of our defence forces".

However, this raises important questions and concerns - a key one being the implied priority given to military capacity rather than civilian capacity to address non-military threats (such as pandemics and bushfires). The risk is that civilian agencies will continue to be under-resourced to do their job, while funding and priorities are skewed even further towards military "solutions". Military spending in Australia is already sacrosanct, with the PM recently confirming an additional \$270 billion over 10 years (over and above the annual defence budget). More far-reaching roles for the ADF could serve as a further pretext for prioritising military defence over other needs, including health and bushfire preparedness.

On health, why is it that our health services were not prepared and resourced for a possible pandemic (which had been predicted), and are not prepared for the health impacts of climate change, while there seems no limit to the resources available to prepare us for possible wars?

On the matter of bushfires, why is it that our fire and emergency services have been denied the capacities and priority they need to keep us safe, when horrific bushfires and other "natural" disasters in future are a near certainty? Last year the PM [refused to meet with](#) fire and emergency chiefs to discuss the bushfire crisis they knew was coming. One doesn't imagine he'd refuse to meet with our defence chiefs if an invasion of Australia was imminent. [Requests for additional water-bombing planes have been denied](#), while major military acquisitions appear to sail through approval processes for vastly greater sums.

While one might argue health, bushfire-preparedness and defence come from different budgets and jurisdictions, we should as a nation be discussing where our major threats lie and allocating resources accordingly. Climate-related disasters would feature strongly in such discussions.

The Defence Department itself [states](#) the ADF is "not trained, equipped or certified to undertake ground-based or aerial bush firefighting". Therefore, why not better resource those who *are* trained and certified for the job? We run risks in not doing so. The devastating bushfire that burned over 80 per cent of Namadgi National Park in the ACT in January 2020 was started by an army helicopter. In October 2013 an army explosives training exercise

caused a fire in the Blue Mountains that burned more than 47,000 hectares of bushland. "Good at fighting off invaders" doesn't necessarily equal "good in bushfire zones".

If our health and emergency agencies were properly funded and equipped, there may still be occasions in future where ADF personnel and resources are needed in civil emergencies, but such occasions should be rare and non-controversial.

A further concern with the proposed legislation is the serious risk of abuse, especially for a "khaki" electoral advantage. We shouldn't imagine that such a thing can't happen here. In the lead-up to the 2007 election, PM Howard deployed troops to the NT, citing a 'national emergency' in relation to conditions in Indigenous communities. The communities themselves were barely consulted and the intervention left them humiliated, traumatised and shamelessly misrepresented in an unsuccessful attempt to gain a political advantage.

Abuse by a PM of the power to send in the troops could also occur in situations of civil unrest. Ugly scenes from the US of [militarised force against protests in Portland, Oregon](#), over the objections of local officials, may seem far removed from Australia, but we should nevertheless be very wary of legislation that helps militarise ill-defined "national emergencies".

To emphasise the capacity for abuse of the power to deploy troops, we should look at the sorry history of the decision-making processes that have occurred to send our troops overseas to war. Prime ministers, such as Howard in 2003, have abused the process, sidelined parliament and made catastrophic decisions, such as to involve Australia in the invasion of Iraq.

Perhaps the greatest irony in the PM's proposal is that it comes from a leader who strenuously ignores the underlying cause of the growing threat from "natural" disasters - our climate emergency. If our PM were seriously concerned about the bushfire threat, he would be focusing on urgent and rapid carbon reductions, not for the ability to call in the military. He would be heeding our Pacific neighbours' [urgent call](#) for climate action to address what the Pacific Islands Forum last August called the "single greatest threat" they face, rather than prioritising military aid and cooperation for the region.

The proposed legislation appears to be yet another example of the government's dangerous tendency to militarise our biggest challenges.

- **Dr Sue Wareham is president of the Medical Association for Prevention of War.**