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Arms Promotions – a History of Controversy

This series of bulletins explores many aspects of the global arms trade, including its participants, its promotion, its victims, and some of the lessons of history. The information is very relevant to Canberra and its identity. Despite very welcome recent additions to the advertisements at Canberra Airport that promote some positive features of our beautiful city, significant weapons advertisements remain

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There is a long history of controversy surrounding arms sales promotions, and outright opposition to the practice, including at local government level in Canberra.

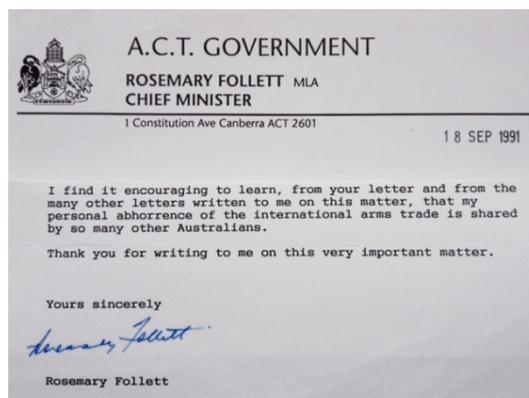
In November 1991, the Australian International Defence Equipment Exhibition, AIDEX, opened in Canberra, and attracted strong controversy. The organisers boasted that AIDEX 89, two years before, had been the “largest and most sophisticated defence high-technology exhibition ever held in the Southern Hemisphere”. However many Canberrans were not so enthusiastic.

The Canberra Times editorial of 2 August, 1991, stated that “The Canberra Times has time after time given its position on the arms trade: it is unequivocally opposed to the whole abhorrent industry.....The right to life of anonymous millions of potential war statistics should outweigh the rights of local manufacturers to increase their profits....”

The ACT Government, led by Chief Minister Rosemary Follett (ALP) shared the concerns. In September 1991, she wrote

“I regret very much that the Government was constrained from cancelling the November 1991 exhibition....I find it encouraging to learn, from your letter and from the many other letters written to me on this matter,

that my personal abhorrence of the international arms trade is shared by so many other Australians.”ⁱ She referred to the consequences of the arms trade for the environment and world health.



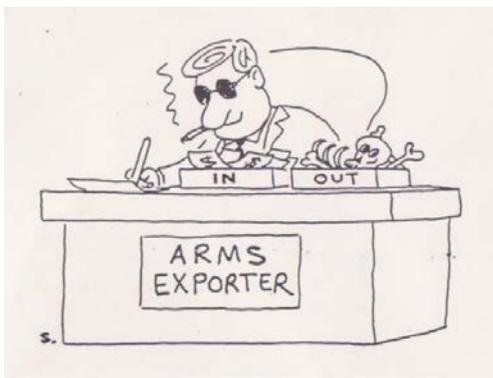
AIDEX '91 went ahead because of contractual obligations, but the government determined that there would be no future arms exhibits conducted from ACT Government controlled premises. AIDEX '93 was cancelled as a result. As the organisers, DESIKO, looked over the border for another venue, the Queanbeyan City Council, under Mayor Pangallo, also decided not to host any future arms exhibits in their city.

Turning to SA, in 2008 the Asia-Pacific Defence and Security Exhibition (APDSE) was due to open in Adelaide, but on this occasion

with the strong backing of both the SA and federal governments. Premier Mike Rann could barely contain his excitement, stating that “Adelaide will be the place to be in November 2008”, and that the exhibition offered an “unparalleled opportunity” for exhibitors. The Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon provided a letter of congratulations to the SA Government.

APDSE’s website listed “Selected trends favouring increased defence spending”, citing specific regional territorial claims, the possibilities of regional arms races, North Korean instability, tensions between China and the US, and others. All the signals that restraint was needed in the arming of our region were used to urge the opposite. Opportunities for armed conflict were not to be missed.

The event attracted strong criticism, not least because it was due to open on November 11, Remembrance Day, when the industrial-scale slaughter of World War 1 is commemorated. The astonishing insensitivity of the timing seemed one step too far, and the event was cancelled, although the organisers cited the likelihood of disruption by protestors as the reason for the cancellation. Many would argue that an arms fair opening on Remembrance Day with a blatant agenda of war profiteering deserved to be disrupted.



The world of academic publishing offers a further example of rejection of the business of arms promotions. In 2005 in the UK, a campaign was launched against Elsevier, publisher of the leading medical journal The Lancet. Elsevier’s parent company, Reed Elsevier, was linked with Reed Exhibitions, organiser of the Defence Systems and Equipment International (DSEi) arms fairs. Campaigners argued that there was an inherent contradiction between the humanitarian values of medicine and the war profiteering on display at such arms fairs.

Reed Elsevier eventually withdrew their involvement in the business of arms exhibitions. Their position during the course of the campaign changed from “Exhibitions such as DSEi serve a legitimate purpose.....” to “The defence shows are no longer compatible with Reed Elsevier’s position as a leading publisher of scientific, medical, legal and business content”.

In the case of Canberra Airport, many people believe that arms promotions are not compatible with the airport’s role as a positive, welcoming and uplifting gateway to our national capital. It would benefit greatly from the approach of the ACT Government 25 years ago.

References

¹ Letter to the Medical Association for Prevention of War (Australia) from ACT Chief Minister Rosemary Follett, 18 Sept 1991

The No Airport Arms Ads campaign was formed because weapons advertisements are inappropriate at a major gateway to our national capital. They help to normalise warfare by presenting sanitised images of weaponry, and they sell short our city by presenting it as a place focussed on preparing for war. New advertising panels in mid-2016 celebrating Canberra’s 100% renewable energy target and our excellent educational institutions are extremely welcome. However significant weapons ads remain, and we look forward to their replacement also by more welcoming signage