

Australian opposition senators slam TPP treaty process

by Richard Chirgwin via gail - The Register UK Tuesday, Jun 30 2015, 1:16am

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As US President Barack Obama signs off on his hard-won “fast track” powers that will allow speedier sign-off of trade treaties, an Australian senate committee has dumped a bucket on keeping trade negotiations secret from parliament.

Keeping the secret from the rest of us, of course, is just fine, so long as parliamentarians can sign some sort of NDA and read treaty text during negotiations.

The Senate Foreign Affairs and Trade Committee, which has been inquiring into the treaty-making process since December 2014, says the processes lack “oversight and scrutiny”.

About secrecy, the report calls the amount of public information about trade agreements insufficient, with a lack of independent economic analysis. “This fuels media speculation ... when certainty based on fact is required”.

The report into blind agreements, yours to read [here](#), says parliament should “not merely rubber-stamp agreements that have been negotiated behind closed doors”.

The report is also critical of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's consultation process, which is “not working”.

The report's [recommendations](#) demand that parliamentarians and their advisors (but not the rest of us) get access to treaty drafts, and calls for a “process of ongoing oversight” of trade agreements while they're under negotiation.

Final treaty texts should be brought before parliament before they're signed, and DFAT should provide “plain English” explanations of treaty text.

What's likely to happen? Nothing: because the minority report written by the coalition senators buckets every recommendation of the majority report, praises trade agreements with Korea, Japan and China, and says the system works well.

A second dissenting report, from The Greens' Peter Whish-Wilson, notes that while the report says parliamentarians need better information about treaties, the majority report's acceptance of the need for confidentiality is anti-democratic.

“The only justification provided by DFAT is that [secrecy] is required due to 'commercial-in-confidence'. Whose interests are being favoured”, Whish-Wilson asks.

Secret trade treaties impact the technology industries - or are thought to - because it is thought the Trans-Pacific-Partnership (TPP) treaty includes provisions on copyright extension and enforcement. Without access to drafts of the TPP it is impossible for citizens of the negotiating nations, or even their parliaments, to understand what they're signing up for. Which seems an odd way to go about things in a democracy.

The Australian senate report comes as The New York Times [reports](#) that President Obama likes signing bills.

No, really: the NYT sent someone over to watch a signing ceremony at the White House so it could report the prez saying “This is so much fun, we should do it again.”

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