Professor Toby Walsh
Scientia Professor of Artificial Intelligence
School of Computer Science and Engineering
University of New South Wales
High St
KENSINGTON   NSW   2052

Dear Professor and co-signatories

I refer to your letter of 22 November 2017, to the Prime Minister,
the Hon Malcolm Turnbull MP, regarding lethal autonomous weapons systems
(LAWS) and the weaponisation of artificial intelligence. As these matters fall within
my portfolio responsibility, your letter has been passed to me for reply.

The Australian Government is alert to the issues you raised in relation to military
applications of artificial intelligence and LAWS, including around the maintenance
of meaningful human control. However, the Government considers it would be
premature to support a pre-emptive ban on autonomous weapons systems.

The international community has yet to reach a common understanding of the
characteristics of LAWS or the applicability of international law to these systems.
The Government considers these dimensions should be explored more
comprehensively before we settle our policies on LAWS and AI.

This process of consensus-building and assessment is most usefully pursued
through the United Nations Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW)
and its Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Autonomous Weapons Systems.
The GGE commenced work in November 2018.

Australia is and will remain actively engaged in the Convention and the GGE.
Although the United Nations Human Rights Council may also have a role in
considering the human rights implications of LAWS and AI-related matters, the
CCW is likely to be the primary forum for international deliberations on these
issues.

In addressing the fundamental practical and philosophical considerations that
apply to these issues, the Government's position is that all weapons and weapons
systems must be compliant with the legal obligations of the States controlling them,
in particular those derived from International Humanitarian Law.

Australia is a party to Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions of 1949. This includes (under Article 36) a requirement to determine, during the study, development, acquisition or adoption of a new weapon, means or method of warfare, whether its employment would, in some or all circumstances, be prohibited by the Protocol or by any other rule of applicable international law.

At the same time, Australia also has an interest in all aspects of emerging technology relevant to Australian Defence Force missions, including autonomous weapons systems. Trusted autonomous weapons systems could have important benefits such as allowing faster and more accurate actions that could reduce risk to friendly units and civilian populations. However, the Australian Defence Force relies on the chain of command to execute its objectives and it is Australia's policy that there will always be human interaction with autonomous systems.

The Government will continue to develop its policies on artificial intelligence and LAWS within the framework of our international obligations, especially international law. I welcome the continued contribution of you and your co-signatories to this important debate.

Yours sincerely

Julie Bishop

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