November 2, 2017

The Honourable Malcolm Turnbull MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull,

RE: AN INTERNATIONAL BAN ON
THE WEAPONIZATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

As members of the Australian AI research community, we wish to applaud you for placing innovation at the centre of your plans for Australia, and in particular the investment that Australia is making in AI research and innovation through bodies like the Australian Research Council and Data61.

As you know, AI research—the attempt to build machines that can perform intelligent tasks—has made spectacular advances during the last decade. The evolution of classical AI, bolstered by rapid advances in machine learning, has revived the ambitions of the AI community to build machines that can carry out complex operations with or without human oversight or intervention. Proliferating applications already underpin a growing variety of products for consumers, for the improvement of infrastructure, transportation, education, the arts, the military, medicine, and for businesses. AI is of transformative significance. The transformations—actual and potential—demand our understanding and, increasingly, our heightened moral attention.

It is for these reasons that Australia’s AI research community is calling on you and your government to make Australia the 20th country in the world to take a firm global stand against weaponizing AI. Lethal autonomous weapons systems that remove meaningful human control from determining the legitimacy of targets and deploying lethal force sit on the wrong side of a clear moral line. To this end, we ask Australia to announce its support for the call to ban lethal autonomous weapons systems at the upcoming United Nations Conference on the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW). Australia should also commit to working with other states to conclude a new international agreement that achieves this objective.

In this way, our government can reclaim its position of moral leadership on the world stage as demonstrated previously in other areas like the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. With Australia’s recent election to the UN’s Human Rights Council, the issue of lethal autonomous weapons is even more pressing for Australia to address. It is worth remembering that in 2013 the Special Rapporteur Professor Christof Heyns was the first to call upon the Human Rights Council to address this issue. He argued that “Machines lack morality and mortality, and many people believe they should as a result not have life and death powers over humans.”
We warmly welcome the decision of CCW to establish a Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Autonomous Weapon Systems. Many members of our research community are eager to lend their expertise to the Government of Australia in this regard. As many AI and robotics corporations—including Australian companies—have recently urged, autonomous weapon systems threaten to become the third revolution in warfare. If developed, they will permit armed conflict to be fought at a scale greater than ever before, and at timescales faster than humans can comprehend. The deadly consequence of this is that machines—not people—will determine who lives and dies. Australia's AI community does not condone such uses of AI. We want to study, create and promote its beneficial uses.

The strong leadership that Australia continues to demonstrate through its focus on technology and innovation will ensure our reputation as an international leader in the technological development of AI only if it also includes considerations of the broader legal, ethical and social implications. We therefore urge you to take a strong and leading position against Autonomous Weapon Systems on the international stage at the upcoming November 2017 CCW meetings at the United Nations.

Sincerely,

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