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Joint Standing Committee on Migration

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Dear Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration,

RE: Inquiry into Multiculturalism and the Contribution of Migration to Australian Society

Liberty Victoria welcomes the opportunity to provide its views to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into Multiculturalism and the Contribution of Migration to Australian Society.

It is a timely inquiry given the changing face of Australia and the social impacts that these changes continue to have.

We have had the benefit of reading the submissions of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV), the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) and the Buddhist Council of Western Australia. We broadly endorse their contributions. In particular, we support the nine underlying principles adopted by the ECCV, as well as their endorsement of multiculturalism as 'a valuable Australian asset', and a means to achieve 'equality without relinquishing difference'. We similarly echo the concerns raised by the ICV regarding targeted discrimination against certain groups within Australia due to public perceptions fed by both male fide and poorly calculated public comment, including by members of parliament.

On the question of 'the role of multiculturalism in the government's social inclusion agenda', we join with the ECCV in emphasizing the important role of human rights education for newly arrived communities. We agree that any such education should be 'broad based and tailored and should be extended to all categories of arrivals'. We also strongly endorse the idea that 'knowledge of rights... are an essential element in increasing participation and the capacity to exercise those rights in a structure of institutions that does not marginalise or exclude them'.

There is however a need to offer human rights education more broadly across the entire Australian community, not only to newly arrived communities, as a means to ensure the protection and development of inclusive communities. For example the extensive National Human Rights Consultation lead by Farther Frank Brennan reported that

The clearest finding from our work is that Australians know little about their human rights—what they are, where they come from and how they are protected. They need and want education. They need and want to create a better culture of human rights in those organisations that deliver public services to the community. (Commonwealth of Australia 2009: v)

We note the recent reports of negative interaction between police and several smaller communities and attacks on international students.

Australia is a signatory to a number of significant and relevant international human rights treaties which support the strengthening of multicultural policy. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights requires that Australia, as a state 'in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, [ensure that] persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language' (Article 27). Similarly, Australia has 'recognized the right of everyone to take part in cultural life' (Article 15, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). These rights in international law must be reflected in the development and strengthening of multicultural policy in Australia. They must also be enjoyed 'without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (Article 2(1) ICESCR).

Australia's commitment to these and other international human rights conventions and treaties has been reaffirmed and strengthened through their explicit inclusion in Australia's Human Rights Framework introduced by the Attorney-General in April 2010 to inter alia encourage greater inclusion and participation in our community.

It is Liberty's view that Australia's Human Rights Framework should be the basis upon which Australia's multicultural policy is developed.

On the question of the contribution of diaspora communities to Australia's international relations, we note that the terms of reference do not refer to the burgeoning contribution of Australia's African diasporic communities. These are and have been for over a decade, the fastest growing ethnic communities in our country. The links they are maintaining and forging are going to be of increasing importance in Australia's ties with that continent. This should be recognised in government policy, especially to the extent that it will provide opportunities to build civil liberties awareness in some of the most disadvantaged places in the world.

Liberty Victoria considers multiculturalism one of our greatest contemporary national assets. Multiculturalism should continue to be built as a source of pride and a point of distinction for us as a nation. We strongly endorse the government's efforts to build on our history of welcoming people in the spirit of the national anthem: 'for those who've come across the seas, there are boundless plains to share'.

Yours sincerely

Professor Spencer Zifcak

President

Liberty Victoria

30 April 2011