

**House of Representatives, Monday 29 June 1998**

**COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report**

**Mr NUGENT** (Aston)(1.04 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the committee's report entitled *Improving but. . . : Australia's regional dialogue on human rights*, together with the minutes of proceedings and evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

**Mr NUGENT** —Given the limited time, I would start by expressing the committee's thanks to the committee secretary, Catherine Cornish, for an outstanding job, together with her support staff of Cliff Lawson, Julia Morris and Peter Ratas. As members are aware, Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region and its attitude to its neighbours in the region have come under particular scrutiny in recent times. Australia has a strong tradition in the promotion and protection of human rights, but recently its credibility has come under the spotlight. We are also mindful that this year is the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This report of the committee is timely, therefore, for its examination of a number of issues. These issues include the place of human rights and the relations between Australia and our neighbours in the Asia-Pacific region; the link between observants of human rights and security and stability, a matter which has been brought into sharp focus in the wake of the Asian economic crisis; the acceptance and impact of United Nations human rights treaties; and the roles played by government and non-government organisations in dialogue and human rights.

In the course of the inquiry, the committee was reminded of the very positive contribution made by Australia to regional dialogue on human rights, especially through the funding of national human rights institutions. A case in point is the recent contribution of \$2 million by Australia to assist the Indonesian human rights commission, as well as the training and support provided to the Indonesian commission by Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. As members are aware, the Indonesian commission has played a crucial role in the recent crisis in Indonesia.

Through its work on both bilateral and multilateral bases, Australia has maintained strong support for human rights. However, some submissions made to the committee suggest that there has been a decline in Australia's role as human rights advocate over the last decade or so. The committee did not make such a finding but it agrees with those who say that there is room for improvement in Australia's role in the region. There will always be room to improve our effectiveness in human rights, to speak up more frequently for those who are not in a position to speak for themselves and to be more persuasive when we make representations on their behalf.

A number of the measures which would make Australia's role in human rights more effective were considered by the committee. I would like to outline three of these briefly. The first would be an increased emphasis on human rights by AusAID in its overseas aid program. This might include programs in human rights education for aid recipients. The second would involve support for proposals that mark the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education and the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. One proposal made to the committee which has merit is the development of a national committee for human rights education. The third would involve appointment of a human rights ambassador, with responsibility for development of policy and programs that serve to promote and protect human rights. Such an appointment would serve as a focal point for the pursuit of human rights issues. It could also play a coordinating role and overcome one of the

difficulties our federal system of government poses for human rights in this country: the need to coordinate with different levels of government.

Without a better foundation in terms of human rights education in the community and commitment to human rights issues such that government is encouraged to seize each opportunity that is presented during its dialogue around the region, Australia cannot hope to be a more effective advocate for human rights. I commend the report to the House.

**Mr BARRY JONES** (Lalor)(1.08 p.m.) —*Improving but. . . : Australia's regional dialogue on human rights* is a valuable resource document, and I hope it will be widely read. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to members of the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, particularly the chair, Peter Nugent, the deputy chair, Colin Hollis and the secretary, Catherine Cornish.

Australia may be undergoing a radical rethinking about its relationship with the Asia-Pacific region and, at a time when economic issues tend to crowd out all others, it is essential that Australia reaffirm its commitment to human rights and humane values.

Much of the report deals with the concept of 'so-called Asian values'—the argument, often expressed vehemently by Lee Kwan Yew and Dr Mahathir, that there is a gap between the Western concept of human rights, seen as individualistic, and 'Asian values', seen as collective, putting more emphasis on social stability than on, for example, freedom of speech. Lee's approach combines Confucian philosophy, the puritan work ethic and a Hobbesian pessimism about human nature.

In the context of the current political debate in Australia, it is essential that we do not demonise Asia, and it is also important that we do not make exaggerated use of terms such as 'Asian values' which create the illusion that the geographical term 'Asia' or 'Asia-Pacific' reflects a uniformity of approach.

One of the more baffling limitations of the honourable member for Oxley (Ms Hanson) has been her misguided belief that, to Australia's north, there is a vast homogenous group of people called 'Asians', they come from a country called Asia, they speak a language called Asian, they share a common culture called Asian and they have a monolithic approach on all issues—including making sure that all Australian street signs are written in Asian. Merely to set out the proposition indicates its absurdity—and, if I can make the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs (Mrs Sullivan) laugh, I must be doing well.

But it is true that some states in Asia and South-East Asia are extremely hostile to criticism by Australia and other Western countries of their use of the death penalty, the imposition of censorship, the crushing of dissent, their apparent indifference to child labour, and their refusal to grant equal rights to women. The suggestion that execution is appropriate for people who live in countries in Asia but not for Europeans is a disturbing demonstration of a double standard—but not originating from us.

I was pleased to hear President Clinton, in his strong speech in Beijing on human rights, protesting about Tiananmen Square and urging that priority must be given to expression of democratic values. President Jiang Zemin made a predictable defence on the basis of stability. But it was a step forward that the exchange was televised.

The report reaffirms Australia's concerns about the use of the death penalty in the region. The US, with whom Australia has such close ties, is a worrying anomaly on the death penalty, in striking contrast to Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and in the production of instruments of torture.

I draw the House's attention to a deeply disturbing article in the New York Review of Books, 24 April 1997, entitled 'Cruel & Unusual Punishment' by William F. Schulz, Executive Director of Amnesty International. In my innocence, I had not grasped that in 1994, under the Clinton administration, the US Commerce Department created a separate export licensing category for 'specially designed implements of torture', the presumption being that any

manufacturer honest enough to call a torture instrument a torture instrument would thereby be assured of being denied a licence. Schulz writes:

Thumbscrews, blackjacks and electronic weapons can be shipped generally under the category of general merchandise to NATO countries (including Turkey), Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Nor has the [US] government required those who order and use such equipment to sign certificates that it would not be re-exported.

The government must look into this.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** (Mr Nehl) —The time for statements on this report has concluded. Does the honourable member for Aston wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

**Mr NUGENT** (Aston) —I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.

**Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER** —In accordance with the resolution agreed to earlier, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for a later hour this day, and the member will have leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.

**Mr NUGENT** (Aston)(9.40 p.m.) —I rise to talk about the report which was tabled this morning, *Improving but. . . : Australia's regional dialogue on human rights*. It is a report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's subcommittee on human rights, which I have the honour to chair and of which the honourable member for Throsby (Mr Hollis) is the deputy chairman.

The subject of Australia and human rights in the region is one which most members of this House take extremely seriously. It is an issue that is often misunderstood. It is an issue on which there are very often differences of view as to how we should go about conducting our human rights activity but, equally, there is common understanding of the goals that we are trying to achieve.

Given the location that Australia occupies in this part of the world and given the history and the nature of some of the societies of our neighbours, not just to our near north but to our north and generally in our region of the world, clearly there are sometimes conflicts between what we would call good human rights standards and those of some of our neighbours. Probably one of the outstanding things that came through in this particular inquiry was some discussion of our performance and whether we were doing as much as we could. Concerns were articulated about whether we were being as proactive, as aggressive and as active as we could be, or have been perhaps in the past, and I think there was a view that perhaps over the last 10 years Australia had not been as active as it should have been. Whether that is factually accurate or not, that is certainly the perception in some quarters. Therefore the recommendations in this report do in part encourage government to be visible and more proactive in the whole range of areas.

One of the other issues to show through as a theme in our inquiry was the current debate about Asian values. Of course, we subscribe very much to the United Nations' human rights universal standard. We take the view that human rights should be universal. Frankly, whether you are a five-year-old child here, in China, India, Indonesia, Britain or anywhere else, you are entitled to the same sort of protection as anywhere else in the world and, if people abuse five-year-olds or women or any citizen in any other way, those human rights should be universal and should be enforced universally.

That is not always accepted in some countries, particularly in some Asian countries. Dr Mahathir, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, argues that, in fact, there are Asian values which

are different from the United Nations' values. He takes the view that it is not all about individual human rights.

**Mr Slipper** —Do you accept that?

**Mr NUGENT** —No, I do not accept that. I thank the honourable member for Fisher for the interjection to make sure that I made that point clear. I do not accept that Dr Mahathir is right. I take the view that we, as individuals, are entitled to rights as individuals, whereas the Prime Minister of Malaysia will take the view that individual rights are not so important. He will take the point of view that the community is much more important than the individual and, therefore, if individuals have to suffer somewhere along the way for the greater good of the community, that is acceptable.

I think that, once you start down that path, you get, of course, to the stage where, if you are prepared to subjugate the rights of the honourable member for Fisher (Mr Slipper) for argument's sake, really it is a short step to saying I will do the same thing to the honourable member for Batman (Mr Martin Ferguson), the honourable member for Mallee (Mr Forrest), the honourable member for Throsby (Mr Hollis) or the honourable member for Fairfax (Mr Somlyay).

So you would be on a slippery slope. It seems to me it is important that if you have a set of principles you have to stick to them. If you start to say, 'For the good of the masses we are prepared to sacrifice the individual,' there is really no telling where that will end. History is littered with examples of that.

It is also important that we understand that in our advocacy of human rights Australia has a fine international reputation and we as a country have been very active in a practical sense in helping a lot of our neighbours develop their human rights institutions. For example, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission provides the secretariat to the regional human rights dialogue, and we have a number of countries in our part of the world which have undertaken strong developments in the human rights area.

We were talking in the previous debate about India and trade. It is also interesting to look at what India is doing in terms of human rights. Whilst there are problems with human rights in that country, one of the things they have done is to appoint a highly independent human rights commissioner and human rights commission. They have some 3,000 staff involved in their human rights activity.

**Mr Slipper** —How many?

**Mr NUGENT** —They have 3,000 staff. This is a country that has got 900 million people, so you are talking about a very large country and a lot of people. They have made a major commitment to starting to update and improve their human rights record.

Even in Indonesia, where we have all been appalled by some of the recent events and the treatment, particularly by police and military, of minority groups and of political protesters and so on, we have started to see the development of a human rights movement. We have seen the appointment of a human rights commissioner. In fact, their human rights body is here in this country this week and will be meeting with our Human Rights Subcommittee on Wednesday. We will be talking to them about development of human rights in their country as well as here. So we have provided expertise, we have provided training and we have provided financial support to try to get human rights off the ground in a number of our neighbouring countries.

I want to talk about some of the recommendations we have made in our report. The first one I want to mention is our very first recommendation, which is:

That the Australian government give consideration to acceptance of the draft Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities, provided that the final document is seen to complement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and not to derogate from it.

We are celebrating this year the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Former Prime Minister Fraser and a number of other leading international statesmen have drawn up a declaration of human responsibilities so that we do not just have rights but on the other hand have some universal responsibility to contribute to one's community, to one's society, to one's country and to mankind generally. This has caused some controversy. It is not meant to replace the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; it is meant to be complementary to that. That is being looked at fairly hard in the United Nations at the moment.

We have also put some emphasis in our recommendations on the need for AusAID to make sure that it is conscious of human rights and in its activities looks at human rights and perhaps goes out there and spreads the good word to a number of the countries where it is working and operating.

In terms of China, as you will be aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, we as a government have taken a somewhat different stance in the last year or two than was previously the case. This government has taken the view that, rather than necessarily standing up and moving motions at the United Nations condemning China's failures in the human rights area, which I think we all acknowledge, it would be more productive not to do that but in fact to proceed on a policy of quiet diplomacy. Therefore, after Prime Minister Howard's visit to that country, we have come to an arrangement where each year in alternate countries, with visits in each direction, we have a dialogue on human rights where we can talk about what the problems are in each other's country and so on. It seems to me that that is a sensible initiative.

It is a break from the traditional way of dealing with things, and certainly there are those in the human rights field who would criticise that. They feel that we should be stronger and more vocal rather than acquiescing with what they would see as China's wishes in the way we handle these matters. Given that standing up and making public pronouncements has not always been successful in this field, it seems to me that it is worth looking at trying to do things somewhat differently.

This government's approach is to have that dialogue with China. Last year it was held in Beijing and this year it will be held here in Australia. A whole raft of subjects and items are put on the agenda: the treatment of Tibet, the treatment of the Panchen Lama, forced sterilisation of women, child labour, imprisonment without trial or police brutality when people are locked up, political prisoners and a whole range of other things. Those things are on the agenda and those things can be talked about. It is worth having a look at this new way of doing things.

That is not to say there are not occasions when you stand up publicly and state your view about what happens to human rights in China. On the other hand, if you can sit down on a one-to-one basis and negotiate some changes in the situation—perhaps we can arrange for some Chinese officials to come here and receive some training in human rights and the mechanisms that go along with it and we could gradually get those introduced into China—then maybe we will see some change. The committee took the view that, given that this change of direction in respect of China was a fairly recent event, it really was too early to make a judgment as to whether the new direction failed or worked. The jury is still out, frankly, and we will have to see how that goes.

In a practical sense we did recommend, for example, that the government should consider whether the next delegation that talks to the Chinese on human rights should not just be bureaucrats, that it should not just be people from Foreign Affairs or the Attorney-General's Department. We think there is a good basis for including experts on human rights from some of the NGOs in this country. This country has a very large force of non-government organisations which work not only in aid but in human rights and a number of related areas, and we have some outstanding people in that field who could contribute mightily to those

sorts of dialogues. That was very much an important message as far as we were concerned. Also, given that a number of other countries are having similar dialogues, we think it is important that our government should liaise with those countries about how they are going in their dealings with China as well.

One of the more high profile people that we have all been conscious of over the last 10 or 20 years is the Dalai Lama and the situation in Tibet. As you are well aware, Mr Deputy Speaker, we had the honour of having the Dalai Lama come to this country last year—

**Mr Slipper** —He was right here in Parliament House.

**Mr NUGENT** —He was right here in Parliament House and met a number of members. In fact, he went down to the National Convention Centre here in Canberra and addressed 4,000 people, and I had the honour of introducing him. That was a very auspicious occasion as far as I was concerned, as it was for many Australians.

It surprised me that, when I talked to the Dalai Lama, he told me that he accepts that Tibet is part of China. He is not looking for full independence. He wants some degree of autonomy, he wants Tibetan culture restored, he wants the human rights of Tibetan citizens to be maintained and he feels that the Chinese are not doing that very effectively; but he is not talking about independence.

In April of last year I went to Beijing with an informal delegation. We raised the subject of Tibet with a number of our interlocutors there, and the attitude was that the Dalai Lama only wants full independence, he does not accept that Tibet is part of greater China and he does not want to talk about autonomy in some areas. In other words, when you talk to the Dalai Lama and you talk to the Chinese in Beijing, you get totally opposite ends of the spectrum. Of course, we are good friends with both countries and it seemed to our committee that Australia could well have a worthwhile role in trying to act as a mediator between the two in resolving some of those issues. We are very keen that that should happen.

In not dissimilar fashion, our nearest large neighbour to the north, Indonesia, has been going through terrible convulsions in the last few months. It is not just a question of the economic difficulties—goodness knows that is bad enough—but there has been quite severe suppression of human rights. Minority Chinese groups have been attacked, police have stood by and watched it happen, people have been locked up without trial and so on. We are quite encouraged—not too carried away yet, but quite encouraged—that the new Indonesian President, President Habibie, is starting to show some signs of being prepared to talk about East Timor, for example, and perhaps being prepared to negotiate.

In the last week or two, the justice minister there has made comments about being prepared to reopen investigations into the deaths of the Australian journalists in Indonesia all those years ago, and we have seen about 12 political prisoners released from gaol in Indonesia in the last couple of weeks. So we are starting to see the beginnings perhaps of some changes attitude in Indonesia on the subject of human rights. We have been a good friend to Indonesia. We are one of the countries that has been part of the bailout, we have substantial business contacts, we are very near neighbours and we have a defence treaty. We have a good working relationship with Indonesia, and the committee sees this as an opportunity for the government to start to push the envelope of better human rights practices out a bit further.

Changing the subject slightly, all is not perfect. One of the areas where we were somewhat concerned is that Australia has been very slack over the years in its reporting obligations under the United Nations and other human rights treaties which it has signed. This is not a criticism of this government alone; the previous government was just as bad. All members of the committee, from both sides, were critical of the fact that governments of all persuasions have been slack and slow in their reporting obligations, and we would urge the government to catch up. I know that it has been doing some catching up on the long outstanding stuff, but we are not up to date yet.

I think it is also important that the Australian government pursue the ratification of international instruments as a major objective of its human rights policy in the region and, in implementing that policy, provide relevant assistance in the form of expertise, grants and education to those countries which seek to ratify and comply with those instruments. What is behind that is the fact that there are a lot of countries in the region—particularly small Pacific island countries—which have signed almost nothing. I am not saying that their human rights records are necessarily bad—sometimes they are bad, sometimes they are not so bad and sometimes they are good—but they really are not part of the international community, for the simple reason that they are too small. They do not have the finance. When you sign off to a treaty there are reporting obligations, conferences to attend and so on, and there is a cost factor. A lot of the small Pacific island countries are not able to afford to do that and it seems to me that that is an area where our aid could be quite useful.

We were very pleased that the government recently set up the Centre for Democratic Institutions. We hope that will allow for the establishment and maintenance of the focus on human rights generally and the dialogue on human rights in particular.

I think the single most important recommendation we made—and I save this until last—was our suggestion that there should be a human rights ambassador appointed. We already have an ambassador for the environment, for example, and it seemed to us that a human rights ambassador would be in a position to bridge federal and state governments, a number of government departments and so on, and that person would have the opportunity to speak and understand human rights across the board so that we could pull it all together and be properly represented overseas.

Finally on the subject of human rights, HREOC and Chris Sidoti, who came and talked to our committee, have been doing an outstanding job for this country in the international sphere, and I offer them my congratulations.

**Mr HOLLIS** (Throsby)(10.00 p.m.) —It is interesting that the report we have just been debating, the report on our trade relationship with India and the report on regional dialogue on human rights, have lots of areas in which there are great similarities, although at a quick reading of the titles you might not get that impression. In relation to a couple of recommendations that I will deal with, regarding the transmitter on Cox Peninsula and the question of child labour, similar recommendations are in both of these reports.

Before he leaves, I would like to pay tribute to the chairmanship of the honourable member for Aston (Mr Nugent). He chaired this committee with his usual skill and diligence. His chairmanship of the committee is, in many ways, responsible for this excellent report we have brought down. I say that because, when you deal with human rights—and I have been on the Human Rights Subcommittee ever since it was established in this parliament back under the Labor government some years ago—you get a tremendous amount of submissions. You get submissions on whatever particular thing is running in the community at that time.

We take note of every submission but, even when you are writing the report, you cannot always give the weight that people think you should give to their particular concern. Of course, then you are open to criticism for not doing that. It is important, in dealing with such a sensitive issue of human rights, that the committee is very ably chaired. These committees have always been very ably chaired.

I would also like to pay tribute to the staff. So often we take what the staff do for granted. We were fortunate that we had three secretaries at various times on this committee: Margaret Swieringa, who was the initial secretary when the committee was first established and who was responsible for a couple of the earlier reports that we brought down; Cliff Lawson, who was there for a period last year; and, from 24 November, Catherine Cornish. Their support staff were Julia Morris and Peter Ratas. I pay tribute to the staff who have so diligently served the committee.

It is an important time to be talking about human rights because this is the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights—or it will be shortly. Also, it seems to me that there has been a no more appropriate time to talk about human rights in Australia than the present. Human rights, or the lack of them, and a respect for them have always generated comment. Last night and indeed tonight on the television I saw film of the President of the United States, Mr Clinton, giving interviews to students. I think tonight he was at a university in Beijing, where students were questioning him. In the report last night, in interviews, some of the young Chinese people were responding to remarks made by President Clinton concerning human rights. They were basically saying that, as he was a guest in their country, he should not have been making any comment on the internal affairs of that country. This is a debate as to whether human rights transcend internal boundaries. Article 2.7 of the UN charter does not apply to this, but people say that they are now of such universal concern that you cannot isolate in particular breaches of human rights, just as you cannot isolate examples of apartheid from the scrutiny of the international community. No-one likes their record on human rights publicly questioned. Even less do people like their record publicly criticised, but it is important that those who would criticise the human rights records of others, such as individual countries, have their own house in order.

We in Australia pride ourselves on our human rights record—and it is a good record; there is no question about that. But we also have to be honest and say that it is not an unblemished record. Before we comment on the human rights of others we must always ensure that our own record is not only unblemished but is also open to scrutiny. I fear human rights for many in this country will come under greater scrutiny, and there will be much more pressure on human rights in this country in the coming months. It is fashionable today to say that people have the right to freely express their views. In this democratic institution we would all agree with that; there is no debate about it. But when someone expresses or exercises a right to express a view that impinges on others' human rights, it must be questioned.

I must also say, somewhat cynically, that we—I guess not only in Australia but in other countries as well—always tend to be most vocal about violations of human rights the further they are from our country. The closer they come to our country, the less vocal we become. Maybe that is human nature or real politics or pragmatism. I do not know what it is, but the further away it is, the more vocal we are. We are not too vocal about violations in our own country and sometimes not too vocal or vocal enough about violations by our neighbours. Yet, by speaking out, we have the opportunity to have an impact. If you are located close to a country, obviously you will have a working relationship with that country. Hopefully, you understand that country and you are sensitive to some of the issues in that country. Therefore, from that position, you should be able to speak out when you see violations of human rights. There also is the point I made earlier of being open to scrutiny with violations. Personally—and do not get me wrong on this—I think we have a good record on human rights in this country. But we did nothing to enhance our good record on human rights when we would not allow, as part of a treaty making obligation, the Europeans to place our human rights record under scrutiny. If we had nothing to be ashamed of, why didn't we allow the Europeans, as was part of the treaty making process, to scrutinise our human rights record? The same principle is involved. The present government has cut funding to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. But by cutting the funding to that commission what sort of message are we sending out to the international community?

I now want to comment on a couple of the recommendation. I agree with the member for Aston (Mr Nugent) when he speaks of the need to have an ambassador for human rights. Again, in chapter 6, recommendation 18, we suggest:



The Australian government examine the possibility of enacting legislation to prohibit the engagement of Australians or Australian companies in exploitative child labour in other countries, and the import into Australia of goods made by exploitative child labour.

We hear a lot about Australian companies going offshore—and they go offshore for all sorts of reasons. One of the reasons for their going offshore is that so often, we are told, they have cheaper labour costs offshore. The member for Aston, I think, in the preceding debate spoke of some of those conditions. I too have visited some of those factories. I have seen child labour in India, and I have also seen child labour in Indonesia and other places. I have seen Australian firms in those countries employing cheap labour. I have also seen goods coming into this country which have been made by young people working in the absence of any decent health and safety conditions; those goods come into this country very, very cheaply and they are sold at a very high cost. There is clothing, there are training shoes and all sorts of things like that.

As I said earlier this evening, I believe that there should be a form of labelling, before goods are permitted to come into this country, stating that those goods are not made with child labour. I know that argument can be shot down in flames. People say, 'Well, how can you enforce it?' and how can you do this, and how can you do that? But you just do not ignore the situation, and such labelling at least is a step in the right direction.

Also, this government has cut our contribution to and our representation at the International Labour Organisation. I know that that is, if you like, an emotive issue. I know that some people say, 'Why should these international bodies pass laws that impact on Australia?' But when talking about these international bodies, speaking from an international perspective, they do have clout. They have been doing certain things over recent years in regard to child labour and I think, even for no other reason, that is why we should be in there with full membership. We should be supporting and helping them to enhance the work they do in connection with child labour.

It may be drawing a long bow to speak again of the transmitter on Cox Peninsula but, again, in this report we made a recommendation about that transmitter. We have made that recommendation because we realise how important the sending out of that message is to Australia's image. People—not only Indonesians, but Australians who were there—have told me that during the recent crisis in Indonesia Australian business people and their families, who for one reason or another were living in Indonesia, and tourists—they received no message at all. They did not know what was going on. We could have had a message coming through to them through Cox Peninsula.

I am not making a party political point on this because I know that many of my colleagues on the other side of the House feel this way too, but I cannot understand why, for a saving of just over a \$1 million, the government has closed down that transmitter. It defies logic. Every member who has been with the committees that have been up in Darwin recently and gone to have a look at Cox Peninsula and spoken to the people there and every member of the House, regardless of where they come from, wants the government to reconsider that decision. Everyone wants them to, but the government—and I do not know why—stubbornly refuses to reconsider that. I would urge the government very strongly to reconsider that decision. It was a wrong decision. It should not have been made. Okay, we all make mistakes; we all make wrong decisions for one reason or another. But in Australia's interests, that transmitter should be reopened again.

In recent years, there has been some discussion about, say, an Asian view on human rights. We talk about Asian values. But, despite what argument is put about it, especially from an economic point of view, I have not met anyone anywhere who enjoys being deprived of their human rights. That will become more and more important as the Asian economic crisis continues to have an impact on Australia.

I do not believe that there are such things as 'Asian values' in regard to human rights. There are human rights: you either respect them or you do not respect them. In the international community you are judged by the way you respect minorities and the way you respect human rights. Human rights are about responsibilities and dignity. Everyone has rights. But, when people feel threatened, they do not enjoy those rights.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I think this is a realistic document. I hope that people will find it a realistic document, with meaningful recommendations. I commend the report to the House.

**Mr SLIPPER** (Fisher)(10.14 p.m.)—I am particularly pleased to join the debate in relation to this report entitled *Improving but . . . : Australia's regional dialogue on human rights* which has been presented by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. I must say that, during this parliament, I have been privileged to be a member of the joint standing committee and, for a period, I was also part of the human rights subcommittee of the joint standing committee.

I would like to commend the honourable member for Aston (Mr Nugent) on his erudite contribution in relation to the debate on this report in the House. The committee received a reference to inquire into and report on the effectiveness of Australia's regional dialogue on human rights, with particular reference to the current debate on the interpretation of human rights in this region; the place of human rights, civil and political, economic, social and cultural, including the issue of freedom of speech and expression in the relations between Australia and our regional neighbours; the place of the debate on human rights and the debate on regional security and stability; the extent of gratification of the UN human rights treaties in this region; and the impact of this on the promotion and protection of the rights of children, including child labour issues, women workers, indigenous people and minorities; and the role of existing institutions both government and non-government, other linkages and avenues for dialogue and the means by which these might be improved.

The joint standing committee has made a large number of recommendations to the parliament and to the government—in fact, a total of 27. Time does not permit me to canvass all of those matters raised in the report. I would, however, like to refer to recommendation 7—that is, that the Australian government examine the possibility of playing a mediating role in respect of initiating dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama. My good friend and colleague the honourable member for Aston in his contribution referred to the Dalai Lama and to debates that he has had both with the Dalai Lama and with the Chinese government. I was one of those privileged to meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama during his recent visit to Australia. I was impressed with the way in which he appeared to have an attitude of always turning the other cheek. There was a peacefulness and a holiness about the Dalai Lama, a humility which seems so rare when we talk with our fellow human beings. I believe it is eminently appropriate that our government do whatever it can to bring about a mediation between the Chinese government, on the one hand, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama on the other.

There is no doubt that in Tibet there have been gross breaches of human rights and that the Tibetan people do not enjoy the freedoms that we would all hope that they should. I was impressed during my dialogue with the Dalai Lama and during the various opportunities I had to meet with him to appreciate the understanding he has of the world situation and, in particular, his appreciation of the circumstances of Tibet and the relationship Tibet has with China and the Chinese government. The fact that the committee has recommended that the Australian government examine the possibility of playing a mediating role in respect of initiating dialogue between the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama is very important. It is appropriate, and I certainly hope that this is a recommendation which the government will accept.

In 1994 I was privileged to be part of a parliamentary delegation to Indonesia, and that delegation visited East Timor. Recommendation 8 says that the Australian government should continue to pursue actively in its dealings with the new Indonesian government its support for a solution to the difficulties in East Timor that is just, equitable and in the best interests of the people of East Timor. I entered East Timor as a person who was strongly supportive of the position of the then Indonesian government. I had the opportunity of meeting, with other members of the delegation, the Governor of East Timor and private citizens in East Timor. While I was in the province for only a short period, it was brought home to me very clearly that this was a very complicated issue.

A member of the delegation met Bishop Belo, the Bishop of Dili. I am particularly pleased to see in the recommendations of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade this provision which says that the Australian government should continue to pursue actively in its dealings with Indonesia its support for a solution to the difficulties in East Timor that is just, equitable and in the best interests of the people of East Timor. As the member for Throsby (Mr Hollis) said, it is easier to be strident and dogmatic concerning the importance of human rights when one is a long way away from the country who you are demanding should apply human rights. They are my words, not his, but that was the gist of what he said. But Australia is not far from Indonesia. We enjoy a very healthy and an excellent relationship with the government of that country and with the people of that country. I hope that we are able to use our relationship with Indonesia, our positive linkages, to improve the situation in East Timor and to help bring about a just, equitable solution which is in the best interests of the people of that country.

Much has been said about human rights and how there are Asian approaches to human rights and how somehow in some circumstances human rights in Asia ought to be less than the human rights in Australia or in other parts of the Western world. I consider that in every democracy human rights ought to be something which are judged on objective values. I do not believe that just because someone happens to be in Asia that person is entitled to a lower level of human rights than people would be entitled to in other parts of the world. Human rights are very important. I must say that successive governments in this country have pursued the issue of human rights in those countries and in those nations where we believe they are not being adequately applied.

The report of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, entitled *Improving Australia's regional dialogue on human rights*, with its 27 recommendations is a very worthwhile and thought provoking contribution to this very important subject. I commend this report and I ask that the government consider very carefully each of those 27 recommendations. I believe that they are important. They have been made after due consideration and after a full inquiry. I would hope that they are accepted widely by the government and by the general community. I commend the report to the chamber.