



Australian Bahá'í Community

Office of External Affairs

Submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia being conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration.

We take this opportunity to commend the Australian Government on the recent launch of Australia's new multicultural policy, "The People of Australia". We look forward to the fruition of the initiatives announced under the policy.

Australian Bahá'í Community

The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920 and its membership reflects the multicultural reality of modern Australia. Australian Bahá'ís come from many backgrounds: according to the 2006 national census, the major birthplaces of members of our community, apart from Australia, are the Middle East, the United Kingdom, maritime South-East Asia, New Zealand, Northern America, Southern Asia, Western Europe, and Southern and East Africa.

As members of the Bahá'í Faith – a worldwide religion, founded over 160 years ago, with more than five million members around the globe – we are united by working together closely in communities to build a global culture based on peace, justice and sustainable development.

For over a decade, the Australian Bahá'í Community has been part of the worldwide Bahá'í community's endeavours to systematically transform society by empowering individuals to become agents of change in their communities. The framework for action guiding these activities has been rooted in a dynamic of learning characterised by action, reflection, and consultation. Across Australia, we have set into motion neighbourhood-level processes that seek to empower individuals of all ages to recognise and develop their spiritual capacities and to channel their collective energies towards service to humanity and the betterment of their communities.

Our submission to this Inquiry is guided by our experience in building a united community at the grassroots which stems from our inspiration in spiritual teachings emphasising the reality of human oneness and the imperative need to create a peaceful world civilisation.

Oneness of humanity

The Australian Bahá'í Community recommends that the oneness of humanity should be adopted as a guiding principle for this Inquiry and its recommendations.

In its statement to the 2009 Durban Review Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, the Bahá'í International Community – a United Nations accredited NGO of which the Australian Bahá'í Community is a national affiliate – pointed out that:

The reality is that there is only one human race. We are a single people, inhabiting one planet: one human family bound together in a common destiny ... a proper understanding of this fact can carry humanity beyond intermediate notions of tolerance based on multiculturalism. Such concepts are stepping-stones towards a peaceful and just world but insufficient to eradicate the deeply rooted afflictions of racism and related prejudice.¹

In emphasising the fundamental oneness of all humanity, we do not seek to deny the magnificent diversity that characterises the human species and, indeed, the people of Australia. On the contrary, we consider the infinite diversity of humanity – whether cultural, religious, linguistic, or otherwise – to be a reflection of the bounty and perfection of Creation, and we recognise that national and/or ethnic heritage can be a source of pride and a backdrop for positive social development.

If, however, multiculturalism were to be based on policies and attitudes that regard society as unalterably divided – a virtually impermeable “community of communities” – then it would risk reinforcing old barriers and insularities, rather than assisting in the building of a new community that is genuinely united in its diversity.

The experience of the Australian Bahá’í Community demonstrates that the various “communities” do not exist as unchanging and separate entities. On the contrary, they are continually evolving and growing through the peaceful, positive interaction of individuals from different backgrounds in our schools, our neighbourhoods, our workplaces, our places of worship, on our sporting fields and even in our families.

We believe that all the complex and varied cultural expressions of humanity found in our nation must be allowed not only to exist, but to continue to develop and flourish by interacting with one another in ever-changing patterns of civilisation, based on a shared commitment to the principle of the oneness of humanity. Otherwise, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and/or religious differences can become a basis for new forms of separation or superiority, however subtle.

Developing the capacities of every individual

The vitality of our multicultural community derives from the degree to which it is able to develop and strengthen the capacities of the individuals and institutions of which it is comprised. Every human being possesses the capacity to develop spiritually and intellectually and to become a source of support and advantage to others. Each individual possesses inestimable talents which can be developed and manifested in service to the common good.

Too often migrants, especially refugees and humanitarian entrants, are perceived as helpless people, overwhelmed by their circumstances and needs, rather than capable agents of change in their communities. It is not enough to conceive of settlement programs in terms of creating opportunities for migrants to meet their basic needs. Rather, with the understanding that each individual has a contribution to make to the construction of a more just and peaceful social order, these processes must be arranged in a way that permits each to play his or her rightful role as a productive member of society.

Accordingly, the Australian Bahá’í Community believes that Australia’s multicultural policy should aim to create an environment in which all individuals, irrespective of their ethnic or national background, can cultivate their capacities to become protagonists of their development and to

¹ <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/statement-to-the-2009-durban-review-conference>

contribute to the well-being of their families and communities. In this way, it will foster the capacity of all members of the community to play their role in the creation of a more just and inclusive society.

In this regard, we wish to highlight the particular needs and potential of two groups: women and girls, and junior youth.

Addressing the needs of women and girls

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that the needs of women and girls warrant particular attention in Australia's policy on multiculturalism.

Women are the first educators of the next generation; their education has a tremendous impact on the family's physical, social and economic well-being; their economic participation increases productivity and drives economic progress; their presence in public life has been associated with better governance and lower levels of corruption. Female literacy, alone, has been shown to play a much more important role in promoting social well-being than other variables related to the general level of wealth in a society

As a result of the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, however, women belonging to minority ethnic, religious or other cultural groups are often most glaringly affected by discrimination, prejudice and intolerance in Australian society. Moreover in many cases, with male immigrants engaged in workplaces and children attending school, it is immigrant women who can form the most isolated group.

Accordingly, we recommend that special attention be given to settlement programs that create conditions for migrant women and girls to develop their full potential as agents of change within and beyond their communities.

Empowering junior youth

The Australian Bahá'í Community recommends that the Inquiry devote special attention to policies and programs that meet the needs and help fulfil the potential of those between the ages of 12 and 15, known as "junior youth".

At this pivotal age, young people are beginning to develop a sense of personal moral responsibility and decision making, are refining their critical thinking skills and are eager to explore the many issues to which their consciences are slowly awakening. Among migrant communities, many have already borne the weight of life's hardships and have the ability to think deeply about the world around them.

As they navigate this critical period in their lives, these young people must be given the tools to recognise the moral issues underlying the choices they make. This stage of development presents an important opportunity for parents, communities, and institutions to help young people not only to develop a positive identity, but also to elevate their thinking and to adopt an outward-looking orientation, which inspires them to work towards the betterment of their communities.

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that the goal of education is not only "the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity", but also the promotion of "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial, ethnic or religious groups". Accordingly, we recommend that the Inquiry recognise that the goal of education

programs for young people should be not only the acquisition of knowledge, but social transformation through the acquisition by individuals of spiritual and moral qualities such as compassion, trustworthiness, service, justice, and respect for all.

In our own programs of spiritual and moral education, the Australian Bahá'í Community offers a Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program for girls and boys in this age group. By developing their spiritual qualities, their intellectual capabilities and their capacities for service to the community, the program helps participants to develop a strong sense of purpose and become empowered to reach their potential, while contributing to the advancement of society. The program adopts a participatory mode of learning as groups of junior youth engage in activities such as artistic expression, discussion, drama, cooperative games, study of literature, story telling and acts of community service. Although the program is still in its early stages of development, the initial results make us optimistic about its potential. We hope to build up our resources to make the program more widely available over time.

Human rights education

Many migrants to Australia, particularly humanitarian and refugee entrants, have come from countries that lack a culture of respect and protection for human rights. They are likely to have experienced broken legal systems characterised by the oppressive and arbitrary application of laws, forced on people unaware of their rights and unable to articulate their needs. As a result, not only are they less likely to seek assistance and redress when their own rights are violated in Australia, but they are also less likely to recognise and identify the human rights of others.

In order to support their full and equal participation and integration into the broader Australian community, the Australian Bahá'í Community recommends that settlement programs for new migrants incorporate human rights education and be presented within a human rights framework.

Human rights education, it should be noted, is not limited solely to the provision of information. As defined by the United Nations, it consists of three dimensions:

- (a) knowledge: provision of information about human rights and mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) values, beliefs and attitudes: promotion of a human rights culture through the development of values, beliefs and attitudes which uphold human rights;
- (c) action: encouragement to take action to defend human rights and prevent human rights abuses

Multi-Faith Australia

While Australian society has always been characterised by a degree of religious diversity, the expanded immigration program of recent decades has greatly extended the multi-faith nature of Australian society. Today Australia is home to thriving religious communities belonging to virtually every major faith tradition. We believe that Australia should continue to embrace a plurality of religious identities and beliefs, gathered together under the canopy of just laws and operating within a human rights framework, as the foundation for a cohesive and prosperous society.

While inter-religious relations have generally been harmonious in Australia, it would be unrealistic to believe that Australia is immune to the religious extremism that has, in so many parts of the world, demonstrated itself to be a major obstacle in the processes of peace. The Australian Bahá'í

Community believes that religious extremism – of which women often bear the greatest burden – needs to be acknowledged and forcefully condemned by government and religious leaders alike.

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that the right to freedom of religion and belief should be fully protected under Australian law. The appropriate standard of protection for religion and belief is, in our view, that set out in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes the freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Given that some Nation-States challenge the freedom to change one's religion and some challenge the right to teach one's faith, it is important that Australia affirm these rights in federal legislation, as this helps to protect religious freedom in other countries, as well as in Australia.

While legislative measures are important, any long-term preventive strategy to address religious prejudice and hatred must ultimately be rooted in efforts to educate children and adults alike, equipping them with skills and opportunities to learn about other systems of belief. Interaction with people of different faiths is important to strengthen appreciation of diverse religious traditions as well as helping individuals to recognise the shared humanity of all people. Without such interaction, other religions remain shrouded in mystery and it is easy for them to become the object of ignorant fears and fantasies.

Accordingly, we would welcome government support for inter-faith initiatives at local, state and national levels as a pro-active strategy for reducing the appeal of religious extremism. One specific measure could be formal recognition by the Australian Parliament of the United Nations-designated World Interfaith Harmony Week in the first week of February, for example, by holding an annual multi-religious service that draws on the diverse spectrum of religions present in Australia. At the institutional level, we recommend the provision of support to an umbrella body such as the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations, on which all major Australian faith communities are represented, in order that it can better fulfil the role of advising government on religious and interreligious issues and acting as a central hub for interfaith organisations and activities in Australia.

In the belief that religious leaders bear a particular responsibility for the prevention of defamatory practices and hate speech and acts, we further recommend that measures be considered to encourage religious leaders in multi-faith Australia to guide their followers, by word and example, to learn about, and enjoy a peaceful coexistence with, those who think and behave differently.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry and look forward to the outcomes of the Committee's deliberations, which we trust will help to achieve the aim of maximising the positive effects of migration to Australia.

Australian Bahá'í Community
April 2011