



THE HON STEPHEN SMITH MP

MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS
PARLIAMENT HOUSE
CANBERRA ACT 2600

09 MAR 2010

Mrs Julia Irwin MP
Chair
Standing Committee on Petitions
PO Box 6021
PARLIAMENT HOUSE ACT 2600

Julia
Dear Madam Chair

Thank you for your letter dated 10 February 2010 about a petition submitted to the Standing Committee on Petitions regarding apostasy laws.

The Australian Government shares the view that Muslims, or indeed persons of any religion, should be able to choose freely to leave their faith and follow a new belief, without penalty.

As the petition notes, the right to freedom of religion, including the right to change religion, is set out in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

In support of this right, Australia has consistently co-sponsored a resolution on the 'Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance' in the United Nations General Assembly's Third Committee. This resolution urges states to "ensure that their constitutional and legislative systems provide adequate and effective guarantees of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief to all without distinction, inter alia, by the provision of effective remedies in cases where the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, or the right to practise freely one's religion, including the right to change one's religion or belief, is violated".

The Australian Government makes regular human rights representations to a number of countries, including those that place restrictions on freedom of religion. We will continue to be alert to opportunities to raise the issue of religious freedom, including the issue of apostasy, in our representations.

Thank you for bringing your views to my attention.

Yours sincerely

Stephen Smith