

Environment and Heritage Committee  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

28<sup>th</sup> April 2006

RE: Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter

I am writing to the Committee in response to your call for submissions to the above Inquiry. In the first instance I would like to applaud the Australian Government for commissioning this Inquiry. I believe that the prospect of a Sustainability Charter for Australia will be of great benefit and significance in many contexts.

I would like to take this opportunity to raise a concern I have regarding the terms of reference and request that the Committee give consideration to expanding them to include people and culture for the following reasons:

Australia's key research priority in 2006 is to 'transform the way we utilise our land, water, mineral and energy resources through a better understanding of human and environmental systems and the use of new technologies (<http://www.dest.gov.au/priorities/>)'. This priority is internationally aligned with critical global issues such as addressing climate change and water conservation and recognises the role of people as decision makers in environmental management. The proposed Sustainability Charter for Australia should also reflect this national priority by recognising, from the onset, the importance of the interface between people and their environments.

Sustainability theory and planning models have as a basis *The Earth Charter*, adopted by the United Nations in 2002. It provides an ethical base and guiding principles upon which many current sustainability models and policies are formed focusing on three sectors: economic, social and environmental. These are also referred to as 'pillars' or 'the triple bottom line' (TBL) and have usually recognised the role of culture exclusively within the social sector. The concept of culture becoming the fourth pillar of sustainability emerged in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in South Africa. The President of France, Jacques Chirac recognised cultures importance. At the same summit Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand (NZ), highlighted the value of biodiversity and the critical link between biological and cultural diversity. New Zealand now has legislative reporting requirements in regard to culture through their *Long Term Community Plans* and can provide Australia with a model that supports

the inclusion of culture in a future Sustainability Charter for Australia. This is particularly important given our rich Aboriginal culture and the increasingly multi cultural composition of our Australian population (23% were born overseas ABS 2002-3).

The proposed Sustainability Charter will reflect Australia's international position and profile and should include such things as our practices of strong governance (including law and order), economic stability and commitment to human rights (it should be noted that these are all people based activities). The importance of human impact in sustainability issues is recognised world wide through institutions such as the web site of The Royal Agricultural College in the United Kingdom ( 2006) which states:

'Increasing human activity, particularly in established economies, has created a severe strain on the natural environment resulting in the over-use and damage of renewable resources and the rapid consumption of finite resources. Such demands are now considered by many to be non sustainable [Earth Summit 1992]. Many of the problems of natural resource management relate to the limitations of institutional structures in developing strategic programmes which consider human social, cultural and economic needs allied to the sustainable use and protection of natural resources'.

As Australia continues to work within national and international environments the recognition of the part culture plays in legislation, planning, and policy is vital. This is being increasingly acknowledged across the world. The United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations has developed training manuals which feature a module entitled 'Cultural Awareness'. The introductory background to this module (UN 2003, p.1) places culture into a necessary perspective:

Until recently, the importance of understanding culture in peace operations was under-estimated.

Challenges associated with culture have arisen due to the expanded and complex nature of modern peacekeeping operations.

Today's missions are multi-culturally composed and take place in diverse cultural contexts.

Culture is a sensitive topic. It provides understanding of group/individual beliefs, values and behaviour and how they are interpreted.

It is most important that peacekeepers understand the differences in cultures and their effects to prevent misunderstandings.

The recognition of culture is also increasingly important in Australia's international negotiations particularly in areas such as trade and climate change.

Australia has a special opportunity to lead the world in sustainability through its current and future initiatives which will be guided by the proposed Charter. There is no doubt that the vulnerable state of the environment is the most critical area of need and these are adequately described in the existing terms of reference. However, the environment cannot be separated from the history and influences of people, the two are intrinsically interconnected. Recognition of this intertwining should be apparent from the onset of the Inquiry providing a foundation upon which a successful Sustainability Charter can be constructed.

If I can be of any further assistance to The Committee and the Inquiry I would be honoured to do so,

Yours faithfully,

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