

ANNUAL REVIEW OF AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE
UNITED NATIONS

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CHAIRMAN, JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN
AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE
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Mr President, I rise to make a statement on behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade about the Committee's ongoing review of Australia's Relations with the United Nations.

The review has its origins in a report presented by the Committee in the last Parliament entitled *Australia's Role in United Nations Reform*.

In that report the former Committee concluded that:

The ideals of the United Nations, as expressed in the [United Nations] Charter, are as important today as they were when they were first written.¹

The report did acknowledge, however, that the United Nations was in clear need of reform if it is contribute effectively to peace, security and improved human rights.

Many of the former Committee's recommendations focussed on the need for greater and more stable funding of the United Nations and

called on the Australian Government to actively support reforms directed at:

- promoting efficiency, transparency and accountability in the UN's administration and financial management; and
- encouraging more representative structures in various UN institutions, including the Security Council.

The former Committee also expressed the view that more active involvement by Parliament in discussing and debating Australia's activities at the United Nations might help improve community awareness and understanding of the role of the United Nations.

To help promote greater parliamentary debate, the report proposed that an annual program of public hearings be conducted on the subject of Australia's participation in United Nations activities.

I can report to the Senate that, earlier this year, the Committee resolved to convene an annual program of review hearings, as recommended by the former Committee.

The first of these annual hearings was held on 2 July this year and involved an examination of officials from the Government agencies most closely involved in facilitating Australia's activities at the United Nations, namely:

- the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade;
- the Attorney-General's Department;
- the Department of Defence;

¹ Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (JSCFADT), *Australia's Role in United Nations Reform*, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra,

- the Australian Agency for International Development; and
- the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The hearing focussed on a series of issues identified by the former Committee as warranting continuing attention:

- the status of Australia's treaty obligations;
- Australia's involvement in UN peacekeeping operations;
- Australia's involvement in UN programs, funds and specialised agencies;
- the work of Australia's permanent missions to the UN;
- the progress of structural and financial reform in the UN; and
- the overall costs and benefits of Australia's participation in the UN.

We also invited those organisations and individuals who had contributed to the former Committee's inquiry to provide additional or updated information. A number of witnesses chose to do so and we received 20 written submissions.

Mr President, I would like to present to the Senate:

- the transcript of evidence taken at the review hearing in July;
and
- copies of the written submissions received.

Copies of all these documents are also available on the Committee's Internet site (www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt).

We found the hearing to be a valuable opportunity to be briefed on and to discuss the nature of Australia's current activities at the United Nations.

We were pleased to note, for example:

- that Australia's initiative to promote reforms in the way that UN treaty review bodies conduct their work is making good progress (despite initial reservations being expressed in some quarters); [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.6, p.8, pp.21-22]
- that reforms to the management of UN peacekeeping operations are being implemented; [see *Transcript of Evidence*, pp.28-32]
- that Australia is developing strategic partnerships with UN agencies (including the UN Development Program and the UN High Commission for Refugees) to increase the engagement and effectiveness of these agencies in the Asia-Pacific region; [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.40, p.44, p.49] and
- that the leading role taken by successive Australian Governments in developing the Statute for the International Criminal Court has come to fruition, with Australia's ratification of the Statute and the creation of the Court on 1 July 2002. [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.19, p.25]

There is also some evidence that the Secretary-General's 2nd term reform agenda (which includes a focus on improving internal financial and administrative processes) is being implemented effectively, although much remains to be done. [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.5]

It seems, however, that little progress has been made, or is expected, on the bigger issues of institutional reform.

Proposals to expand the membership of the Security Council (both the permanent and non-permanent membership) and to remove the veto power held by the existing five permanent members (which Australia and others have advocated for many years) are deadlocked. The reality seems to be that in the absence of dramatic shifts of geo-political opinion (particularly on the part of the existing five permanent members) the prospects for Security Council reform are slim, at best. [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.5, p.59]

While there is growing agreement that the UN's informal system of voting blocks, or electoral groups, is out of date and does not accurately reflect current membership, there is little agreement on alternative models. Until there is widespread acceptance that a credible alternative would work more effectively than the current blocks, there seems little prospect of change. [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.5, p.61]

Despite these, and other limitations, we have seen in the last twelve months that the United Nations can play a central role in giving voice to, and helping bring together, world opinion.

It has been an influential forum for:

- the coordination of responses to the threat of terrorism; [see *Transcript of Evidence*, pp.3-4, p.9, pp.20-22] and
- debate about crises such as Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction.

We remain firmly of the view that it is in Australia's interests to be fully committed to the United Nations.

This is not to say we should be uncritical in our engagement with the United Nations. As a large organisation, driven by international political will and with a complex agenda, the United Nations does have many failings, for example:

- sometimes the agenda of its conferences are hijacked by special interest groups; [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.5, pp.7-8, pp.10-11, pp.15-16]
- sometimes its programs or initiatives are poorly focussed or managed; [see *Transcript of Evidence*, p.31, p.41, p.43, p.44] and
- sometimes individuals working on UN-sponsored activities act in an unethical or illegal manner [see *Transcript of Evidence*, pp 44-46].

In our view, the appropriate response is not to withdraw but to build coalitions with other member nations and the organisation itself:

- to challenge resistance to reform; and
- to ensure that when mistakes are made, remedial action is taken.

As noted by the former Committee:

... remaining fully committed to the United Nations is the only choice ... the United Nations has the potential to provide a more ordered and just international community, in which smaller powers have some influence in the world and serves to promote our national interests.²

Mr President, as I have already remarked, this annual review has been a valuable opportunity to continue the process of parliamentary consideration of Australia's relations with the United Nations.

Given the dramatic changes in world affairs over the last 12 months (particularly the new and unpredictable threat posed by terrorism), I have little doubt that the Committee will continue to review Australia's relations with the United Nations on an annual basis.

END

² *Australia's Role in United Nations Reform*, p.xxiii