

Senate, Monday 29 June 1998

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

**Senator MacGIBBON** (Queensland)(4.30 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present a report entitled *Improving but . . . : Australia's regional dialogue on human rights* together with the Hansard transcript and minutes of proceedings.

Ordered that the report be printed.

**Senator MacGIBBON** —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

I seek leave to incorporate my tabling statement in Hansard and to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted.

The statement read as follows—

As senators are aware, Australia's place in the Asia Pacific region, and its attitude to its neighbours in the region, has 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 in the relations between Australia and our neighbours in the Asia Pacific region;
- . the link between observance 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 on human rights.

During 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 senators 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 suggested 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 up for themselves, and to be more persuasive when we make representations on their behalf. A number of measures which would make Australia's role in human rights more effective were considered by the committee and I will outline three of these briefly.

- . an increased emphasis on human rights by AusAID in its overseas aid program. This might include programs in human rights education for aid recipients;
- . 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; and

. 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 could 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 poses for human rights: 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 Senate.

Debate adjourned.