



Australian Bahá'í Community

Submission of the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy

Unity in Diversity: Moving Beyond Multiculturalism vs Assimilation

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy and wishes to commend the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee for opening this crucial conversation.

The Australian Bahá'í Community is a religious community comprising the followers in Australia of the Bahá'í Faith, an independent religion with more than five million members throughout the world. The Bahá'í community has been present in Australia since 1920 and is widely spread across cities, regional and remote areas. For the past century, Australian Bahá'ís have sought to work together with others to contribute to social cohesion and harmony in Australian society. Our contribution is based on the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), the Prophet-Founder of our religion.

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As outlined by the Committee, at the heart of the Inquiry is the erosion of trust in public institutions in the context of rapid demographic and economic change. Unprecedented levels of international migration and seemingly unending technological disruptions in communications, employment, and many other spheres have left Australia – like so many other places around the globe – struggling to define itself and its way forward. Cultural and civic touchstones that have long provided Australians with a sense of membership in a national community appear increasingly under threat. It must also be acknowledged that underlying the decline in public trust is the issue of trustworthiness, as a range of public scandals have caused many to question whether our time-honoured institutions are worthy of the trust traditionally vested in them.

The restoration of social trust is intimately connected with the development of a vision of who we are as a nation. People are not only losing a sense of identification and investment in government, but also in the society around them – a society that seems to be undergoing social and economic change at a rate beyond people's capacity to easily adapt. Growing distrust of government and growing distrust between social groups are intertwined.

In the past half century, Australia moved from a general ethic of cultural assimilation – within the context of the “White Australia policy” – to one of multiculturalism. This change from a vision of society based on the “melting pot” to one based on the “salad bowl” was undoubtedly a major step forward. It was borne out of a greater awareness of the need to respect diversity and not expect new arrivals, indigenous Australians, or other minority groups to disown their culture in order to participate in the life of society.

There are, however, limitations inherent to multiculturalism. In the name of respect and tolerance, artificial boundaries can be created between groups. We can come to live side by side but never really allow each other in: a community of seemingly impermeable communities. Cultural diversity should be celebrated and protected, but it is important not to seek to quarantine ourselves off from the influence of others. Throughout history, ethnic and cultural groups have never developed in isolation. On the

contrary, the practices, norms, cuisines, languages, and beliefs of every people are, to a large degree, living cultures that evolve as a result of their interactions and exchanges with their neighbours.

There is of course nothing wrong with feeling connected to one's race, religion, community, or culture. The challenge arises when individuals and groups lose sight of the value and naturalness of engaging with and learning from people of different backgrounds and come to define themselves in opposition to others. This leads to a hardening of viewpoints, increased incivility, an unwillingness to even attempt to understand differing perspectives, a tendency to automatically take sides, and even outright conflict.

In recent years, Europe and the United States have found their societies fracturing within the framework of multiculturalism, with some of their leaders even declaring the project "failed". This has come in parallel with a global upsurge in tribalism along political, ethnic, and religious lines, in which people turn inwards and embrace echo chambers of fractured thinking. In Australia, multiculturalism as an ideal appears to continue to hold together, but the global trend toward tribalism has certainly manifested itself in this country, and it will likely present increasing tests to multiculturalism's long-term viability.

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The answer to this challenge is not a return to an expectation of assimilation, but the development of a new narrative of national identity. While such a call may appear overly abstract for addressing the practical issues at hand, the lack of a constructive and coherent vision of who we are as a national community lies at the root of the problem. Paradoxically, the growing tendencies towards exclusion spring from the basic human need to feel a sense of belonging.

In this connection, at the core of the Bahá'í community's perspective on building social cohesion are the twin concepts of the oneness of humanity and unity in diversity. Humanity's fundamental oneness is the pivot around which the Bahá'í Faith revolves, and it is our belief that any sound vision of national identity must be embedded within this overarching framework. From this vantage point, seeming permutations of "us" and "them" no longer define group identities in contrast to one another, and the reality that humanity is first and foremost one people shines through. Much as a single cell does not function separate from the human body, but rather as a contributor to and beneficiary of the health of the body as a whole, so too the individual is not set apart from the body of humankind, and likewise contributes to its well-being and benefits therefrom. Far from stymieing difference or undermining patriotism, accepting that we all share a common humanity and belong to one human family enhances national and cultural identity by placing them in their proper perspective.

Similarly, although sometimes used as empty slogan, unity in diversity in its true form presents a fundamental challenge to the way most of us see ourselves and others. In contrast to assimilation, which asks for homogeneity or uniformity, and multiculturalism, which can foster the "essentialisation" of difference, unity in diversity protects distinctive expressions of culture while calling for the enthusiastic embrace of others. It moves beyond mere tolerance and counts cultural diversity as an asset. It enables us to see beyond a model of 'a community of communities' towards a strengthened understanding that we all form part of one national community. By drawing on a wider array of talents and capacities, it entails the weaving together of many different cultural strands into a wholly new pattern of community life – a pattern which is made stronger and more beautiful by the diversity of its elements.

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We recognise that the process of translating ideals such as these into the everyday life of our nation is not a straightforward one. It will require leadership, far-sightedness, and a process of learning that accepts trial and error. As a first step, the Australian Bahá'í Community wishes to encourage the opening of more and more spaces for dialogue and exchange between people of diverse backgrounds in developing a path forward for our nation. It has been our experience that the simple act of bringing people of different groups together to explore a common set of questions and discuss their lived experiences, with openness and a humble posture to learn, is a hugely powerful act. Here, we wish to emphasise the importance of encouraging spaces to emerge from grassroots settings, where people come

together to address the challenges, identify the opportunities around them and become protagonists in developing and implementing solutions.

This is a process that can not only remove prejudices and forge new bonds, but also yield unexpected insights. To be successful, however, such consultative spaces should go beyond superficial engagement and sincerely seek to elicit new ideas from previously untapped sources. Unprecedented problems sometimes require unprecedented approaches to finding solutions. For example, in developing social policy to meet Australia's twenty-first century challenges, rather than drawing on the tried and tested perspectives arising from an individualistic or materialistic value system, dominant in most Western societies, it may be necessary to incorporate the proposals from those for whom the community is the most important unit of society. Whatever the end result, meaningful participation in making and implementing decisions will be crucial for all people to feel they have a voice and an investment in our society.

We all have a part to play in the continued development of our nation: the individual, community and institutions. For our part, Australian Bahá'ís are committed to patiently working with those around us to build community that can foster a strong sense of belonging in neighbourhood settings. Together with our neighbours and friends, we are learning to cultivate environments in which children can be raised untainted by any form of racial, national, or religious prejudice, where the full equality of women with men in the deliberations of the community is championed, and where programs of education welcome everyone who wishes to contribute to the community's prosperity. In different parts of the country, humble social and economic projects express the desire to remedy the numerous challenges impacting our neighbourhoods and to empower each person to become a protagonist in the building of a flourishing nation. People of all faiths and beliefs are included in gatherings for prayer and reflection. Youth, distinguished for their commitment to a society founded on peace and justice, are engaging their like-minded peers in the work of building communities on this foundation. Our experience of community-building at the neighbourhood level in Australia gives us great confidence in the future of our nation and the goodwill of its citizens.

In many ways, Australia represents a microcosm of the world, and it has the potential to be a living experiment in the oneness of humanity and unity in diversity. If Australia – with all its ethnic and cultural diversity, its flawed history of exclusion and oppression, and its rapidly transforming socio-economic realities – can succeed in developing a compelling new narrative of national identity, it can serve as an example to other countries going through similar challenges.

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The Australian Bahá'í Community thanks the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee for the opportunity to provide its views to this Committee. We look forward to learning of the outcomes of the Inquiry.

Australian Bahá'í Community
September 2019