



Australian Bahá'í Community

Submission of the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Australian Labor Party's Multicultural Engagement Taskforce

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Labor Party's Multicultural Engagement Taskforce to inform Federal Labor's policies and the broader role of the Commonwealth government in securing a more inclusive society and economy.

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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What do you want to see for the future of multiculturalism in Australia?

Australia has achieved a great deal in recent decades in building a largely peaceful and harmonious multicultural society. Still, much work remains for the country to live up to its ideals, fully reckon with the injustices of its past and present, and ensure that everyone feels they truly belong in our national community. Strengthening social inclusion will therefore demand more than simply carrying forward current thinking and practices. Our experience in 2019-20 in facilitating 50 roundtables across the nation with a wide range of stakeholders on the subject of social cohesion has made clear that, while it is essential to recognise our multicultural diversity, this is not enough.

In shaping policies which consider the role of multiculturalism in social cohesion and Australian identity, and its direct impact on multicultural communities, the Australian Baha'i Community wishes to offer for consideration two foundational principles which may be of assistance: the oneness of humanity and unity in diversity. These principles can be incorporated as elements of any framework to examine current policies and inform the creation of new ones in light of Australia's ever-changing diversity and the opportunity this has provided for a renewed understanding of our identity.

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. Just 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. It dissociates our distinctive identities from the destructive implications they can bring about when taken to extremes — such as racism, defining oneself in opposition to 'others', and other forms of overt and subtle discrimination.

Similarly, although sometimes used as an 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.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that oneness and diversity should not be seen as competing considerations. Working for oneness does not represent an appeal for uniformity, and diversity need not be viewed as an obstacle to reaching agreement.

We recognise that the process of translating ideals such as these into the everyday life of our nation is not straightforward. It requires leadership, far-sightedness, and a process of learning that accepts trial and error in order to address the needs of individuals and communities of *all* backgrounds who make up our multicultural landscape – Indigenous, those whose past generations were European settlers and from subsequent waves of migration, or recently arrived. Most often this is done by providing services and enabling economic empowerment, justly and fairly, so every person has equal opportunity for upward mobility and to contribute back to Australian society. In addressing the needs of society, it is important not to lose sight of the broader aim to nurture a society striving to reach greater degrees of unity in diversity and consciousness of what it means to be one human family. If these guiding principles can be incorporated to reorient deliberations at the national level, government can bring Australian society into its confidence and facilitate an ongoing collaborative process of reflection and consultation on how its policies are striving to contribute to these ideals and then make the necessary adjustments, however incremental.

Out of the 18-month nation-wide roundtable project emerged the [*Creating an Inclusive Narrative* publication](#) (please see attachment). The project identified the following seven priority ‘Pathways for Action’ through which significant yet achievable steps can be taken towards greater social cohesion:

- Build resilient communities (p. 17)
- Neighbourhoods – settings for intense learning (p. 19)
- Ensure the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples (p. 21)
- Rethink the role of media (p. 22)
- Redefine the purpose for education (p. 22)
- Draw on the true purpose of religion (p. 23)
- Foster new models of leadership (p. 24)

We urge the consideration of these pathways in the formulation of multicultural policies, programs and services.

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How can the Government better support you, your family and your community?

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.

Our experience of Australian life is that various communities and groups do not exist as static, isolated entities. The pandemic has highlighted and heightened the realisation that our world is going through a time of transition and change. As a result, our values and ideals are constantly evolving through dialogue with individuals and groups from different backgrounds. At the individual and interpersonal level, this dialogue often takes place informally in our day-to-day lives in schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and sport fields. It also takes place within our increasingly intercultural families. The ability to engage in

constructive intercultural dialogue depends greatly on the sorts of ideas that we communicate — or fail to communicate — to our children and youth, as well as to older members of our families.

In many ways, it may be at the local community level that we must discover answers to certain basic questions about social cohesion in our country. Of course, it is key that this understanding not remain localised but rather, increasingly translated into change at the societal level. For it to be sustainable, the effort of building a socially cohesive country will require approaches that go from the bottom up and from the top down. As such, it is essential to also foster intercultural discourse in larger, more formal settings — in conferences, seminars and meetings, amongst institutions and groups from city councils to the federal Parliament. Engaging in such a multi-level process of social discourse can help to negotiate and transcend differences to create a new shared culture of diversity and oneness. Australia's diversity could well prove to be one of our greatest assets, if we can learn to unlock its full potential.

The atmosphere and manner in which consultation is carried out is critical. Adversarial methods of debate, partisanship or protest are not conducive to building consensus; nor will spaces where participants feel their involvement is superficial or tokenistic generate a collective will to act. What is required is a different approach to decision-making and dialogue, one which acknowledges and unlocks the capacity of every individual and group to contribute to constructive social change.

True consultation requires an atmosphere characterised by courtesy, candour and trust, where all are equal participants in a collective search for truth, which is rooted in the recognition of our common humanity. Ideas belong not to the individual who articulates them during the discussion, but to the group as a whole. Once a view has been contributed, the group can use it, set it aside or revise it in their sincere search for truth and to determine the best course of action in a given context. Individuals are invited to build on the ideas that have been contributed by others, to be open to learning and to transcend their original points of view rather than insisting upon them. Once a decision has been reached, all participants are to lend their full support to its implementation, so that it can be genuinely tested on its merits and not doomed to failure from the outset because of a lack of support. If the results are found wanting, further consultation can occur in the light of the experience gained and lessons learned.

While diversity is often understood in terms of different cultural backgrounds, where all have different but valid insights to offer, it can also be understood in terms of one's relationship to historical injustices. In this case, the perspectives of those who have experienced injustice become indispensable in efforts to construct a more just society. Drawing on the widest possible participation in decision-making processes on issues of shared concern — and particularly on those voices that have historically been marginalised — can help ensure that blind spots are minimised or removed altogether. The challenges we face as a society are complex, and no one group, ideology or culture has all the answers. The more we draw on our diversity, the more complete will be the picture of social reality available to all participants, and the greater the new perspectives and methods of thought gained. It has been our experience that the very act of bringing people together enables prejudices to be dispelled, bonds to be forged, and new partnerships made possible. Accordingly, the participation of those who might otherwise be excluded — including, youth, immigrants and indigenous peoples, among others — must be not only valued but actively sought out.

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In the continued development of our nation, we all have a part to play: the individual, community and institutions. For our part, Australian Bahá'ís are committed to patiently working with government, civil society, the media and willing individuals to build a community that can foster a strong sense of belonging for all who live in this country. In small 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 likeminded 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 socioeconomic realities – can succeed in cultivating a more inclusive society, it can serve as an example to other countries going through similar challenges.

The Australian Bahá'í Community thanks the Australian Labor Party's Multicultural Engagement Taskforce for the opportunity to provide its views to inform Federal Labor's policies and the role of multiculturalism in social cohesion and Australian identity. We look forward to learning of the outcomes and welcome the opportunity to further contribute towards this process.

Australian Bahá'í Community
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