



Australian Bahá'í Community

Submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community to the Inquiry on Strengthening Multiculturalism

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Strengthening Multiculturalism in Australia being conducted by the Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism. We take this opportunity to commend the Committee on undertaking this inquiry. While globally Australia remains a strong example of a multicultural society, we acknowledge the value in creating this opportunity to advance our understanding as a nation on this issue, which is of great importance to the attainment of a peaceful and prosperous Australian society.

This submission addresses the overarching theme of the Inquiry, how to protect and strengthen Australia's multiculturalism and social inclusion. The submission has particular bearing on the following areas within the terms of the reference:

- How to improve the expected standards of public discourse in matters related to 'race,' colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief.
- How to better recognise and value the contributions that diverse communities bring to Australian social and community life.

Australian Bahá'í Community

The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920 and its membership reflects the diverse reality of modern Australia. In addition to those born in Australia, Australian Bahá'ís come from the Middle East, Europe, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and New Zealand, North and South America, and the African continent.

The Bahá'í Faith is a worldwide religion, founded over 170 years ago, with more than five million adherents across the globe. As Bahá'ís, we are united by our faith in Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet and founder of our religion, the bicentenary of Whose birth we are celebrating this year, and inspired by His vision of building an inclusive global community that is both peaceful and prosperous for all.

The Australian Bahá'í Community is part of the worldwide Bahá'í community's endeavours to systematically bring about social transformation. These endeavours primarily take place through community-building efforts at the grassroots, in villages, towns and neighbourhoods across Australia, that seek to raise capacities in individuals and populations to take charge of their own social, intellectual and spiritual development. This submission is guided by our experiences in building united communities that aim to reflect the principle of the oneness of humanity, guided by the vision of a peaceful and prosperous world civilisation.

Oneness of humanity

There can be no doubt that Australia has achieved much in recent decades in building a largely peaceful and harmonious multicultural society. Protecting and strengthening Australia's multiculturalism and social inclusion into the future will, however, demand more than simply continuing the policies of the past. Rather than focusing on where we have come from, it is of vital importance for our discourse on multiculturalism to lift its vision to look to the kind of society we wish to build together into the future.

To construct a nation that is genuinely united in its diversity, we need to advance beyond the necessary but limited conception of multiculturalism which sees society as a divided aggregate of competing elements, or as a conglomerate of differentiated groups - a “community of communities” - who negotiate amongst themselves to advance their own self-interests. This is an understanding that risks solidifying existing barriers and insularities amongst groups of people, rather than building a genuinely unified society. Our experience of Australian life is that various communities and groups don’t exist as static, unchangeable and isolated entities. Instead, their values and ideals are constantly evolving and advancing, especially through peaceful and positive interactions and discourses with other individuals and groups from different backgrounds. These interactions and discourses take place informally in our day-to-day lives in schools, neighbourhoods, streets, workplaces, sport fields and even within our families, as well as formally through conferences, seminars and meetings, amongst institutions and groups from city councils to the national Parliament.

We believe that the principle which must guide the process of building a genuinely united Australia is the oneness of humanity: the fact that there is only one human race, a single people inhabiting one planet, one human family bound together in a common destiny. The principle of the oneness of humanity is an eternal spiritual, moral and physical reality which has been brought into focus over the past decades by humanity's increasing interdependence and interconnectedness. It thus provides the strongest and surest foundation for our progress as a unified society into the future. An unshakable belief in the oneness of humanity offers a framework within which the many complex and varied cultural expressions of humanity found in our nation can continue to evolve, develop and flourish through continuous interaction with one another, enabling the development of a peaceful and prosperous nation that is genuinely united in its diversity. Consciousness of this principle will also help to improve the standard of our public discourse in matters related to ‘race,’ colour, national or ethnic origin, culture or religious belief. We recommend that the Committee take this principle as a guide to this Inquiry and its findings.

Fostering and valuing the contribution of all

If we are to effectively recognise and value the contributions that all communities bring to Australian social life, and encourage increasingly constructive, evolving and united interactions between Australians of all backgrounds, we will need to look at the nature of the various formal and informal interactions and discourses that we have with one another.

To be effective, this will require a different approach to decision making and dialogue. The worldwide Bahá’í experience suggests that more effective outcomes are achieved when decision-making and dialogue is approached as a shared effort to explore the underlying reality of relevant circumstances— a collective search for truth and common understanding. Within such a framework, ideas and suggestions do not belong to any single person or entity. Nor does their success or failure rest on the status or influence of individuals, institutions or groups that put them forward. Proposals instead belong to the decision-making group as a whole, which adopts, revises, or discards them in whatever way conduces to the greatest understanding and progress. Crucially, decision-making and dialogue such as this explicitly seeks to strengthen the bonds that unite participants. In this way, the shared commitment needed for effective implementation is built through the consultative process itself, and shared principles arise naturally to guide the discourse: principles such as the oneness of humanity, and faith in the capacity of each individual and group to contribute to change.

This conception of participation can express itself in both formal and informal spaces at all levels, from the grassroots to the national level. While government can and must play an important role in providing spaces where discourse between diverse actors can occur, the efficacy of such spaces increases when they arise naturally as a result of heightened consciousness amongst individuals and groups that are empowered to take charge of the own social and intellectual development. One area of learning that could be a focus for the Australian government is the creation of an environment that fosters the natural and organic emergence of these types of spaces for consultation. This environment will be most effective if it allows for the ownership of these spaces to be held by the participants themselves.

The Australian Bahá’í Community’s experience in this area, while modest, lends some useful insights about participation, guided by the framework of consultation outlined above. We have found that

effective community-building processes amongst diverse peoples and populations --including Bahá'ís and others such as neighbours and friends -- require regular gatherings for consultation at all levels, allowing for those concerned with the well-being of their communities to openly and frankly explore their circumstances, reflect on their experiences, and decide on steps forward. In our case, these spaces take place at the most basic level in gatherings in streets, neighbourhoods and suburbs, at a regularity suited to the circumstances of those in that area. At a more formal level, individuals, groups and communities working in a 'cluster' of areas gather together at least quarterly to share insights and experiences and to plan together. This process is further carried out at the regional and national level in more formal settings, drawing directly on the insights arising at the grassroots and the 'clusters.' This experience thus far has yielded a vibrant and unified process of learning in which people of all backgrounds are participants in the generation, application and diffusion of knowledge about building a peaceful and prosperous society. When this consultative and participatory process is coupled with an educational process, for all ages, that seeks to empower individuals and communities to take charge of their own social, intellectual and moral development, we have begun to see the glimmerings of a process of profound social transformation.

The application of the principle of the oneness of humanity calls for universal participation. Just as the fullest functioning of a healthy body requires the contribution of each and every cell and organ, so too a united society requires the conscious contribution of all members and groups. This means that groups and populations that have traditionally been at the margins of society must be included in any discourse that strives to bring about a flourishing society. We would particularly encourage special efforts to increase the participation of women and girls, youth (aged between 12-30 years), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and religious communities in these discourses. We feel that their participation is vital to bringing about new perspectives and methods of thought that can greatly advance the national conversation around the development of a peaceful, interconnected and prosperous society.

Such participation must not be tokenistic. The participation of marginalised groups cannot be limited to the options provided by more dominant actors. Instead our discourses must endeavour to draw upon the views and perspectives of the widest cross-section of society possible. The input of those who might otherwise be excluded must be not only valued, but actively sought out and embraced, and barriers to the full and effective participation of any particular group, whether based in traditions, customs, habits, or prejudices, must be frankly addressed and resolutely overcome.

The role of faith communities

As a faith community present in Australia for almost a century, we would like to draw particular attention to the role religious communities and their leadership can and should play in fostering a harmonious society. Enshrined within all the great religious traditions, including indigenous spiritual beliefs, are values and attitudes that are necessary for the creation of peaceful and prosperous society. Religions call us to a higher standard of unity, asking us to move beyond tolerance to genuine love and acceptance for those who are different from ourselves. With these values as a guiding light, the various religious traditions within Australia can play a significant role in providing moral leadership, encouraging the development of those values which can allow for constructive and humble dialogue between various groups and people. We encourage government to look to them as potential partners in this process.

To ensure that religion is a constructive and positive contributor, its members and leaders must acknowledge and address the strife and suffering caused by those who have appropriated the symbols and instruments of religion for their own selfish purposes. Fanaticism, conflict and sectarianism can poison the wells of acceptance and love, and create corrupt expressions of true religious values which will only serve to create further division and separation. A great duty thus falls on those who exercise leadership within religious communities to express and practice the values enshrined in their faiths in a way that helps to advance social cohesion and peace, and to foster and enable the constructive participation of their communities in the national discourse around the development of a harmonious society.

Our experience causes us to be optimistic in this regard. As pioneers and active participants in the movement to build unity between religions, we have witnessed the maturation of inter-faith dialogue and the multiplication of inter-faith spaces at all levels in Australia over the past two decades. This has shown the increasing desire of diverse religious communities and leaders to be willing partners in the process of building unity within Australia. The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations, to take just one example in which we are closely engaged, regularly hosts forums attended by diverse religious communities, members of government and their representatives as well as academics, journalists and civil society groups. In these spaces, there is a willingness to explore directly the role that religion can play, and the participants are not afraid to shy away from the many challenging issues that need to be addressed. For example, at the most recent forum, held on 22 February 2017 on the theme “Religious values and the value of religion”, 100 participants from diverse religions worked together to identify key issues affecting the spiritual and material progress of our country, and the contribution faith communities can make to addressing these.

Based on this experience, we believe the role of religious communities as a constructive part of the discourse around social harmony could be an important area of learning in Australia. One approach, building on the example outlined above, could be to create spaces at various levels where religious leaders and representatives from all faith groups can gather together to share their experiences and learn from one another. Such spaces could be ongoing and guided by a framework of systematic and dynamic learning. Within this framework participants could be invited to share the approaches and methods they are adopting within their communities to translate their values into constructive action and dialogue, and to consult and reflect with others in an effort to collectively learn what is most effective in fostering unity. These spaces could thereby be used to generate a body of knowledge that can help create a new and evolving understanding about the role that religion plays as a moral force for fostering social harmony in contemporary Australian society.

We thank the Committee for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. We look forward to the outcomes of the Committee’s deliberations, which we trust will help to achieve the aim of protecting and strengthening Australia’s multiculturalism and social inclusion.

Australian Bahá’í Community
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