

2022 National Social Cohesion and Inclusion Conference Summary



[Watch the conference videos and see photographs from the event.](#)

The fourth annual *National Social Cohesion and Inclusion Conference*, hosted by the Australian Baha'i Community in Sydney in May 2022 was attended by over 125 participants from 57 different organisations and community groups. These participants explored the settings, approaches, methods and experiences that can assist Australia to move towards greater levels of social cohesion and inclusion. Motivated by current events such as increasing international tensions, the world entering the third year of the global health crisis, and rising national consciousness of the fragility and interconnectedness of human beings, the conference provided the opportunity to reflect on the lessons learned and the significant distance traversed over recent decades to strengthen social cohesion in Australia.

The National Social Cohesion and Inclusion Conference included keynote presentations, panels, artistic and cultural performances, and small group consultations on the following themes:

- A vision of social cohesion in Australia
- The distance traversed in community, mass media and government institutions
- Obstacles impeding further progress
- Glimpses of social transformation: Experiences from organisations and communities



The conference opened with a Welcome to Country by Yvonne Weldon, a Wiradjuri woman and the Deputy Chair of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council. Yvonne shared the importance of the Welcome as a spiritual process that reminds us that we walk together with the generations that have come before us and those that come after us. Further, Yvonne noted that the continued resilience and survival of First Nations peoples reminds us of the principles which are strongly valued in First Nations communities - respect, understanding, collaboration and a willingness to come together. Additionally, Yvonne highlighted that the lived experiences of all people must be included in the understanding of social issues, which requires **conscious effort to seek participation and voice**.



This year's conference was connected to a series of 90 World Conferences held around Australia, hosted by the Australian Baha'i Community. Ida Walker, Director of Public Discourse for the Australian Baha'i Community, presented the insights gained through the discussions which occurred at these conferences and were captured in *The World Conferences in Australia - Report*. These grassroots conferences brought together over 13,000 adults, youth and children from diverse communities and neighbourhoods to deliberate on the country's **material, spiritual and social progress** and to explore the steps required to traverse obstacles impeding social cohesion. Participants at the National Social Cohesion and Inclusion Conference were able to draw on this report to enrich their deliberations.

Cultural presentations and performances provided insight into the conference themes of the **oneness of humanity, unity in diversity and belonging** while creating an uplifting environment of fellowship and common purpose. These included performances from Ngarigo Aboriginal Dance Company *Doonooch*; Spoken word poetry performed by *Donna Rohani*; Mount Druitt hip hop group *Manifold*; and South Australian-Kenyan singer/songwriter *Pupil*. The opening reception provided an opportunity for bonds of friendship and networks to be strengthened in preparation for the following day's sessions.

The second day of the conference began with a keynote address by Hugh Mackay AO on the theme of “Kindness: the key to social cohesion.” Hugh’s address laid out a **conception of human nature characterised by interconnectedness and interdependence** and explored how kindness serves as a preeminent quality and an innate expression of this notion of humanity, serving to strengthen social cohesion. *“Because we are born into a cooperative species our capacity for kindness is our most precious human asset...When we are true to our nature, we are treating each other as we understand that we are each other, that we are all one, we are all members of one human species”* he stated. Hugh noted that the trends emphasising individualism and fragmentation over the past few decades have undermined this notion, leaving humanity less socially cohesive than ever. Yet, the past few years have allowed for a reassessment of this trajectory. The goal before us now is to seek out opportunities for the country which can make the most of the lessons learned.

To build on Hugh Mackay’s presentation, the next three speakers looked at the distance traversed to strengthen social cohesion in grassroots community settings, government institutions, and the media.

Tessa Scrine, a Member of the Continental Board of Counsellors for Australasia discussed developments at the community level. Drawing on the experiences of community-building efforts around the country facilitated by the Australian Baha’i community, Tessa



noted that key qualities and principles need to guide action for it to be effective. These principles need to include a conception of **each human being as an active protagonist in the transformation of their communities**, whose well-being is, in reality, contingent upon the well-being of their community. *“Human beings were not created to live alone, we belong to communities and it is within communities that we flourish, and communities flourish when all of the people within it are part of it and contributing,”* Tessa emphasised. In this context, institutions find that their relationship to the community and its individuals is redefined, where through the creation and facilitation of consultative spaces, they help to release the capacity of individuals and channel the efforts of the community.

Aleem Ali, CEO of Welcoming Australia spoke about the **role of government in building harmonious communities**, drawing on the example of the significant efforts of the City of Greater Bendigo and Welcoming Cities to build unity in response to community division around the construction of a mosque. While initially challenging, effective leadership allowed this to become an opportunity for the community to become closer. This experience showed how governments can be leaders in this area, but Aleem noted that *“it begins with a willingness to lead with a posture of humility and valuing the inclusion and belonging of all people. A*

willingness to listen and willingness to look inwards, a willingness to walk the talk and understanding how that impacts the people around us.”

Vic Alhadeff, a member of the Board of Directors of SBS spoke on the **capacity of the media to foster positive change**. “*Media can make a positive change in affecting social cohesion and promoting inclusion. It comes down to leadership in advocating for positive change.*” Yet, the current media landscape is beset by particular challenges, such as the twenty-four-hour news cycle, sensationalism, its competitive and commercial nature and its growing politicisation and radicalisation. This has led to fringe ideas such as the [‘great replacement theory’](#) coming back into the mainstream of social discourse. Given the ubiquitous nature of contemporary media, tackling these challenges requires leadership and dialogue at all levels of society and across all spheres of media.

The session culminated with a lively audience Q&A with Hugh Mackay, Tessa Scrine and Vic Alhadeff, moderated by Ida Walker, Director of Public Discourse of the Australian Baha’i Community. This allowed for the following areas to be further unpacked and explored: questions addressing conceptions of human nature and its expression in institutions and structures in society, the role of leadership and individuals in advancing a socially cohesive society, the interplay between free speech and responsibility, what can help institutions transform when operating within faulty and entrenched systems, and what can help people remain resilient in the face of social forces that seek to foment division.



Participants proceeded to break into small groups to **reflect on the lives of the people they are serving** and supporting through programs, funding, and other services. They were encouraged to articulate the vision and aspirations these people hold for social cohesion in Australia and how this is practically unfolding. They also sought to describe the barriers those they serve face towards feeling a sense of belonging, the distance they have traversed to become a part of their local community, spaces that exist for consultation or reflection, qualities and attitudes needed to strengthen social cohesion, practical approaches to remove the barriers which remain and the social transformation they are seeing the groups they are engaging with. [Small group discussion questions can be accessed at this link.](#)

In the afternoon keynote address, Joseph La Posta, CEO of Multicultural NSW spoke of the need for more voices to counter social and ideological ideas which foster division and the necessity to promote new concepts of social cohesion. Joseph highlighted the role that state governments can play in seeking out and inviting diverse voices to be heard in consultative settings and the importance of **enshrining values supportive of participatory and inclusive practices within state legislation**. He noted that **young people**, in particular, are **empowered**

by their participation in conversations that seek out new conceptions of social cohesion, conceptions that can counter these divisive narratives. Joseph also asserted that *“empowerment is about building up the experience of young people and bringing to the fore their leadership qualities”* in the context of such active engagement.

The panel discussion explored examples of social transformation across different sectors. Moderated by Awa Momtazian, Acting Director of Media Relations of the Australian Baha’i Community, the panel was composed of Vic Alhadeff, Ruha Fifita, Dr Chrisanthi Giotis and Hari Remala who each shared their experience with initiatives that have had socially transformative effects:

Vic Alhadeff spoke about the Keep NSW Safe Campaign and legislation Section 93Z that made it an offence to incite violence and the **process that resulted in communities and government coming together to change state law.**

Ruha Fifita presented the experience of Ivi Projects and its collective art projects which seek to **create unifying engagements and harmonise diversity through community artistic endeavours** and outlines the principles and values that govern its approaches.

Dr Chrisanthi Giotis shared insights from the Reimagining the Media Landscape initiative that has sought to **redefine media values** in the wake of the Christchurch Mosque attack and her experience working with **journalism students who approach media under new assumptions.**

Hari Remala spoke about his experience working with a team of friends trying to **reconceptualise the nature of community life** on a few streets in a neighbourhood in Sydney. He outlined the **principles, methods and approaches that have made significant changes to social cohesion** in the area and how an increasing number of people are taking greater responsibility for strengthening it.

[Videos of each of the speakers and the panel sessions can be found at this link.](#)

