

# AUSTRALIAN Baha'i Report

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A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í Community

## Indigenous speakers address reception during National Reconciliation Week



Cr Dominic Wy Kanak and Ms Bettina King

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Indigenous speakers addressed a reception following a National Reconciliation Week service at the Bahá'í Temple in Sydney on 27 May.

An indigenous member of the Bahá'í community, Bettina King, opened the reception on behalf of the Australian Bahá'í Community.

"In 1993 we were among the faith communities that started the Week of Prayer for Reconciliation, which was expanded in 1996 to become National Reconciliation Week," said Ms King, a Narrungga woman from the Yorke Peninsula on her mother's side and a Wardaman from the Northern Territory on her father's side.

As chair of the reception, Ms King introduced keynote speaker Dominic Wy Kanak, a board member for the New South Wales Reconciliation Council and a Waverley City Councillor.

Cr Wy Kanak said the Reconciliation Council was working to help achieve a "reconciled Australia" and that reconciliation had as many meanings as the number of people gathered before him.

Aspirations aligned to actions for reconciliation would help achieve a better society, one with greater respect for and acknowledgement of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders, said Cr Wy Kanak, a Torres Strait Islander.

Cr Wy Kanak said indigenous people had often banded together in response to the challenging conditions they have had to endure.

He also spoke about respecting the natural environment and the obligation of each human being to respect the country.

Following his presentation, participants in the forum discussed topics including deaths in custody, relationships with the police, the need for education and cultural awareness, and community responses to alcohol use.

In summing up, Ms King said how positive it is that the Bahá'í community is having a dialogue about reconciliation.

"One of the most important factors of Cr Wy Kanak's presentation was about how individuals can take action on a local level," she said.

"Cr Wy Kanak showed us information from ANTaR (Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation) and Reconciliation Australia that provides ideas on how people can support reconciliation and social change for indigenous Australians."

The service in the Temple included prayers and readings, as well as the choir chanting from scripture.

# Festival celebrated throughout Australia



Stuart Robert MP

Bahá'í communities throughout Australia celebrated their holiest period, the Ridvan festival, in a variety of ways in April and May.

At an event on the Gold Coast, involving prayers, music and speeches, the Federal member for Fadden, Stuart Robert MP, addressed the concept of the oneness of humanity.

Mr Robert said there is "so much that makes us one, so much we all have in common".

"Our unique fingerprints attest to the specialness of each one of us, yet our combined heartbeats attest to the oneness of us all," Mr Robert said.

"We all share the same planet and yearn for the freedom to choose, to love, to learn, to grow and to pursue happiness," he said.

Mr Robert also reinforced the sentiments in the speech he delivered in the Federal Parliament in November 2011.

In that address, Mr Robert condemned the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, saying that regimes which persecute their people because of the content of their character and their love and service to mankind are not worthy to stand amongst the global community of free people.

"Such regimes have heaped condemnation upon their own heads. So tonight as we freely

celebrate, we re-affirm our commitment to stand side by side with those who are suffering. We will not forget them. They deserve our prayers, our support and our advocacy. And they will receive it."

## Interfaith guests

In the city of Banyule in Victoria, the Bahá'í Community organised an event combining a spiritual program, musical performances and audio visual presentations.

Guests at the event included members of the Banyule Interfaith Network as well as other people of various faiths and backgrounds.

After the welcome, the master of ceremonies, Omeed Rameshni, read a message from Prime Minister Julia Gillard (see page 3).

Susanne Haake presented an introduction to the history and mission of Bahá'u'lláh, illustrated by beautiful slides. This was followed by readings from the Bahá'í Sacred Writings.

A recital by prize-winning pianist Amir Farid and well-known oboe player, Annabelle Badcock was followed by an improvisation on Persian setar, an instrument which is a member of the lute family.

A video on the unity in diversity of the world's religions concluded the program.

Amir Farid playing piano and Annabelle Badcock playing the oboe at celebrations in Victoria





# Principles guide election and consultation at convention

Bahá'ís from throughout Australia elected the members of the Faith's national governing body at the annual convention in Sydney in April.

Principles followed by Bahá'ís throughout the world guided the conduct of the election and the consultation on important issues at the National Bahá'í Convention held from 27-29 April at the Sydney Bahá'í Centre in Silverwater.

Conducted by secret ballot in a prayerful atmosphere with no nominations or electioneering, the election by 95 delegates was the central focus of the convention.

All adult Bahá'ís in Australia, men and women, were eligible to be elected to the nine-member National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia. The Faith has no clergy but is governed by elected councils at national and local levels.

Instead of being persuaded by campaigning of any sort, the delegates base their choices on who they individually and privately believe best combine the qualities of "unquestioned loyalty, selfless devotion, a well-trained mind, recognised ability and mature experience".

Those elected to the National Spiritual Assembly were Arini Beaumaris (Sydney), David Chittleborough (Adelaide), Anton Jones (Brisbane), Eric Kingston (Sydney), Fiona McDonald (Perth), Fariborz Moshirian (Sydney), Golshah Naghdy (Wollongong), Vahid Saberi (Lennox Head), and Bijan Samali (Sydney).

Convention delegates, representing electoral units in all parts of Australia, heard a message from Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

They then discussed issues of concern to the Australian Bahá'í Community, adhering to principles of consultation used in Bahá'í communities worldwide.

During consultation, participants strive to be frank and candid while maintaining a respectful interest in the views of others. Ideas presented are considered to belong to the group, rather than to the individuals who put them forward. Personal attacks, ultimatums and prejudicial statements are avoided.

Points of consultation included plans for community development, educational programs



*Members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia*

for children and young teenagers, and working with other Australians to transform the neighbourhoods in which they live.

The delegates attended a service at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Mona Vale after the convention concluded.



*I am very pleased to provide this message to the Australian Bahá'í Community for this year's Ridván Festival and to the delegates of the National Bahá'í Convention.*

*Ridván is an important day in the Australian Bahá'í Community's calendar, commemorating the start of Bahá'u'lláh's prophethood and marking the elections to the Australian National Spiritual Assembly.*

*The Australian Bahá'í Community's efforts in fostering broader understanding of its own and other cultures in Australia through inter-faith dialogue and community activities supports social cohesion and helps make Australia the positive and diverse society that it is today.*

*My warmest wishes to everyone participating in this joyful festival.*

**The Honourable Julia Gillard**  
Prime Minister of Australia



## Documentary portrays creative response to tertiary education ban

A documentary portraying the creative efforts of Iran's Bahá'í community to educate its youth following their banning from public universities had its Australian premiere in Sydney on 19 April and has since screened at the University of Wollongong.

Screenings were also arranged for Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory on 21 June and for the University of Western Australia in Perth on 22 June.

*Education Under Fire*, co-sponsored by Amnesty International (USA), tells how the Bahá'í Community of Iran set up the Bahá'í Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) for their youth, whom the Government bars from attending public universities due to their religion.

BIHE, in which some Australian professors are involved via the Internet, hit the news throughout the world last year when Iranian authorities jailed its professors and administrators.

Among the seven staff members jailed was accountancy teacher Farhad Sedghi, 64, who was sentenced to four years. He is a brother of prominent Dubbo businessman Nasser Sedghi.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor of University of Technology Sydney, Professor Shirley Alexander, opened the premiere in Sydney on 19 April at UTS, and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wollongong, Professor Joe Chicharo, opened the screening there on 4 May.

"We are delighted that UTS was chosen to host the screening of the Australian premiere of *Education Under Fire*," Professor Alexander said.

"Over the last few years, UTS has been very supportive of students from the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education by accepting a number of graduates into our research programs," she said.

"We are very concerned that the government of Iran denies Bahá'í students access to higher education--we really support this campaign."

Academics, students and community members attended the screenings and the subsequent panel discussion during which BIHE staff and students spoke.

A BIHE graduate (who is not identified here for security reasons) now undertaking postgraduate studies at UTS said the universities in Iran were closed to her because she was a Bahá'í so she undertook her undergraduate study with BIHE.

"Although the BIHE e-learning system was among the most rigorous possible, the Government has banned its use, confiscated its equipment and imprisoned faculty members," she said.

"I wish one day all Iranians could live in a land with no tyranny."

BIHE graduates, who are taught by volunteer academics, have obtained higher degrees from universities in countries including Australia and the United States. The New York Times described BIHE as an act of "communal self-preservation".

The screenings begin campus and community discussions throughout Australia to raise awareness of the importance of defending Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which guarantees education as an inalienable right of every human being.

Among those speaking at the premiere were Bahá'í external affairs director Dr Natalie Mobini and UTS faculty members Professor Bijan Samali and Associate Professor Daksh Baweja.

(Left to right)  
Dr Natalie Mobini,  
Associate Professor Daksh Baweja,  
Professor Bijan Samali  
and Professor Shirley Alexander





# Australia features in global campaign to free Bahá'í leaders



Australian icons have provided spectacular backdrops for an ongoing global campaign to free seven Bahá'í leaders unjustly jailed in Iran.

A mobile billboard appeared on April 1 in front of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Opera House and Bondi beach.

The eye-catching design carried the images of the seven leaders made up of smaller photographs of hundreds of other prisoners of conscience currently held in Iranian prisons.

Photographs and video footage of the billboard were then linked in a media and internet campaign featuring iconic sites in 12 cities around the world: Amsterdam, Berlin, Brasilia, Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg, London, New Delhi, Paris, Sydney, Washington DC, and Wellington. The video can be seen on YouTube.

The campaign, organised by the NGO *United4 Iran*, marked 10,000 days that the seven leaders had collectively spent behind bars in Iran.

The seven were each sentenced to 20 years imprisonment after an internationally condemned trial characterised by a lack of due legal process.

Australian relatives of the Bahá'í leaders accompanied the mobile billboard in Sydney.

Sydney resident Mehrzad Mumtahan told interested members of the public about his uncle, Saied Rezaie, and Ghodsieh Samimi spoke about her niece Mahvash Sabet.

Australian Bahá'í Community spokesperson Venus Khalessi said there was a positive response to the billboard message from members of the public, ranging from surfers at Bondi to visitors to the Opera House.

"At Bondi, one couple recalled a campaign on the same theme in Berlin last year. They said they supported the efforts to free the Bahá'ís, and told us that we should keep praying for their release," Ms Khalessi said.

Also present and supporting the event was Claire Hammerton, former chair of the NSW Young Lawyers Human Rights Committee, which has written to the Iranian Ambassador raising concern about the imprisonment of the leaders.

The Australian Government, the Federal House of Representatives and State Parliaments have called for the release of the seven. Australia has co-sponsored a series of resolutions in the General Assembly of the United Nations against Iran's treatment of Bahá'ís.

To watch the video from the global campaign, visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRuXEEEvC14>

*Mehrzad Mumtahan and mobile billboard in Sydney*

*Venus Khalessi (left) and Ghodsieh Samimi*



## Award given to creator of children's program



Annette Subhani with her Multicultural Award for Excellence

A member of the Bahá'í community of Victoria, Annette Subhani, has received a State award for the children's program she created and has run for the past decade.

The Victorian Government honoured Ms Subhani with a Multicultural Award for Excellence in recognition of her "Sharing Circles" program, which brings together children of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Ms Subhani received her award at a ceremony at Government House which was hosted by the Governor of Victoria, Alex Chernov, and organised by the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

More than 500 guests attended the event in which individuals and organisations received awards for their service to Victoria's multicultural and wider community.

Ms Subhani said the character development program, which is held weekly, is for children aged two and older.

"The program focuses on the spiritual nature of individual children, and it helps them understand themselves, embrace diversity, see themselves as global citizens, and want to serve others," Ms Subhani said.

"It is complementary to the material and physical education provided by preschools, day-care, school and families themselves," she said.

"I am thrilled with the award which shows that through individual, sustained action we can make a difference and contribute to the world around us."

## Call for educational programs to combat racism

Educational programs for children, youth and adults are indispensable for addressing racism in Australia, according to a Bahá'í submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission, which is developing the national anti-racism strategy.

"The goal of education programs should be not only the acquisition of knowledge, but social transformation through the acquisition by individuals of spiritual and moral qualities such as compassion, trustworthiness, service, justice, and respect for all," said the May 2012 submission from the Australian Bahá'í Community.

The moral capabilities attained in such programs must be "anchored in the central social and spiritual principle of our time, namely the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity as a whole", it said.

"These capabilities can and should be taught in schools, but also need to take root in the family and the community."

The submission recommended that special attention be given to programs that create "conditions for women and girls to develop

their full potential, free from the constraints of racism and racial discrimination".

It also advocated that Government programs relating to indigenous Australians should aim to create an environment in which everybody can cultivate capacities to become protagonists of their development and to contribute to the well-being of their families and communities.

The submission recommended positive measures to foster association between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians at all levels.

"This is the task on which reconciliation is founded, as no real change will come about without close association and friendship."

The submission said that particular attention should be devoted to policies and programs that meet the needs and help fulfil the potential of those aged between 12 and 15, known as "junior youth".

For further information about the national anti-racism strategy, visit:

<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/antiracism/>



# Cultures connect at Commonwealth Day event

Wearing a sari that portrayed her family background, Sara Perananthasivam of the Australian Bahá'í Community helped illustrate the "connecting cultures" theme of the annual Commonwealth Day observance in Canberra on 12 March.

As one of the readers from eight faith communities at the event, Ms Perananthasivam read an extract from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that included: "Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch".

Ms Perananthasivam then read a commentary that said in part: "The infinite diversity of humanity - whether cultural, religious, linguistic, or otherwise - is a reflection of the bounty and perfection of Creation, and it enriches us all...

"The sense that the earth's inhabitants are indeed a single people, albeit infinitely varied in secondary characteristics, is slowly becoming the standard by which humanity's collective efforts are now judged."

The theme of a united human family and the importance of diversity was also the fore in readings and commentaries by representatives of Buddhist, Christian, Jain, Jewish, Hindu,

Muslim and Sikh communities.

The Australian Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, read a message from the head of the Commonwealth, Queen Elizabeth II.

"Our circumstances and surroundings may vary enormously, for example in the food we eat and the clothes we wear, but we share one humanity, and this draws us all together," Queen Elizabeth said.

Canberra MP Gai Brodtmann read a message from Prime Minister Julia Gillard: "This year's theme, The Commonwealth: Connecting Cultures, goes to the very heart of what makes the Commonwealth such a valuable institution - bringing together nations and peoples of diverse cultures and faiths in a spirit of mutual respect and common ideals."

At the Commonwealth Day observance at St George's Cathedral, Perth, on 11 March, Wendy Wisniewski of the Western Australian Bahá'í Community read a Bahá'í prayer.

Representatives of the other faith communities also read prayers. The Governor of Western Australia, Mr Malcolm McCusker, attended.



*Australian Governor-General  
Quentin Bryce and Sara  
Perananthasivam*

# Leadership course unites participants from faith communities

Three Bahá'ís are participating in a Multi-faith Future Leaders program in Victoria.

The program is organised by the B'nai B'rith Anti Defamation Commission with the support of the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

At a camp, the Bahá'ís joined in activities with 35 other people, between the ages of 18 and 28, who came from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh communities.

"The program encouraged the exploration of each person's beliefs and traditions while maintaining an atmosphere of friendship and acceptance, allowing all the participants to feel comfortable with each other," said one of the Bahá'í participants, Yung Han Lim.

Workshops were held exploring commonalities among the faiths, as well as

story telling, skill sharing, traditional songs from all communities, a wedding re-enactment, and a martial arts demonstration.

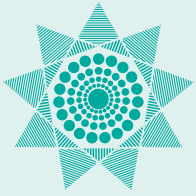
Professionals ran interactive sessions on public speaking and conflict resolution. There were interactive workshops including theatre sports and, a highlight, African drumming.

The participants produced a quilt, each contributing a square which depicted their vision of hope, peace, religion and harmony.

A reunion has already been held, as has a visit to a Sikh temple (gurdwara). Some participants also attended a Bahá'í Ridvan celebration.



*Participants in Multi-faith  
Future Leaders program*



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*For more information on the stories in this newsletter, or any aspect of the Australian Bahá'í community and its activities, please contact:*

**Australian Baha'i Report**

173 Mona Vale Road  
Ingleside NSW 2101  
Australia

Phone:

(02) 9746 8347

Fax:

(02) 9998 9223

Email:

opi@bahai.org.au

World Wide Web:

www.bahai.org.au

Editorial team:

Michael Day  
Venus Khalessi  
Natalie Mobini

Staff Writer:

Michael Day

Graphic Design by  
Simon Creedy

www.creedy.com.au  
(02) 9427 0632

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Comparing women and men to the two wings of a bird can help extend thinking beyond gender divisions, a speaker told a function held after a service in the Bahá'í Temple in Sydney to mark International Women's Day.

A keynote speaker, Sarah Creedy, a member of the Young Women's Advisory Group to the Equality Rights Alliance, drew attention to the analogy in the Bahá'í writings:

"The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and the female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly..."

Ms Creedy said the goal of each wing is not to build strength for itself but for the whole of humanity "to wing its way to real attainment".

The concept of "oneness" was important to remember when we divide the human race into categories such as gender, she said.

"The danger comes about when we forget to bring these fragments back together and understand them as a whole - for example men and women as belonging to one human family.

"Transformation must take place in individuals and in society," said Ms Creedy.

"It is not enough to simply think of equality as equal representation of men and women in existing systems and structures - a clear indicator of the advancement of women will be a restructuring of these systems, which will be founded on principles of oneness, peace and justice."

Ms Creedy said the Young Women's Advisory Group is focused on raising the volume of young women's voices in policy-making and issues that can affect women, and on raising consciousness.

"Part of my work with the group has included writing articles for a blog, creating a space for young women to explore our role in advancing the cause of equality," she said.

### Giving a voice

Another keynote speaker was Vivi Germanos-Koutsounadis, OAM, People of Australia Ambassador and chair of the Australian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Alliance.

Ms Germanos-Koutsounadis spoke about the role of the People of Australia Ambassadors and of the alliance, both of which aim to give a voice to those often excluded from input into policy.



*Sarah Creedy (left) and Vivi Germanos-Koutsounadis*

"International Women's Day was instituted 101 years ago to highlight the needs of women. Women often for many reasons are subjected to discrimination, violence, exploitation. Their human rights are violated as they do not have adequate access to information to enable them to voice their concerns, interests and issues."

Ms Germanos-Koutsounadis said all faiths have similar principles but see them from different perspectives.

"They all preach peace, love, humanity, caring and living together in harmony, and express in their writings gender equality and women having the same rights as men in the order of things in the spiritual and material world."

The service in the Temple included prayers and readings which focused on the topic of women and equality.