



Australian Bahá'í Community Office of External Affairs

Submission to the United Nations Association of Australia consultation on Australia's role on the UN Security Council

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the United Nations Association of Australia's consultation on Australia's role on the UN Security Council.

The key question being addressed in the consultation is what Australia should aim to achieve if it is successful in its bid for a seat on the Security Council for 2013-2014.

The candidature brochure sets out an ambitious range of areas in which Australia would seek to make a contribution as a Security Council member. The Australian Bahá'í Community endorses the view, expressed by Prime Minister Julia Gillard in the brochure, that "Australia has the capacity, energy and experience to make a strong, positive contribution to the Council's vital work".

This submission firstly sets down the foundational principle that we believe should guide all Australia's actions as a member of the Security Council. It then highlights three specific areas we consider particularly important: human rights, gender equality, and interfaith and interreligious dialogue.

Australian Bahá'í Community

The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920 and its membership reflects the diversity of modern Australia. As members of the Bahá'í Faith—an independent worldwide religion, founded over 160 years ago, with more than five million members around the globe—we work to promote and apply principles derived from Bahá'í teachings which help address current challenges facing humanity. Our efforts are directed towards the development of a peaceful, just and sustainable global civilisation, inspired by the principle that humanity is one family.

The Australian Bahá'í Community actively supports the goals of the United Nations Charter. We have a wide-ranging interest in the United Nations, including the UN reform agenda and its human rights machinery. At the international level we are affiliated to the Bahá'í International Community, an international non-governmental organisation with affiliates in over 180 countries and territories. Since 1945 the Bahá'í International Community has interacted and cooperated with the United Nations and its specialised agencies on behalf of the Bahá'ís of the world.

Foundational principle

In her introduction to Australia's UNSC candidature brochure, the Prime Minister observed:

The importance of the Security Council to the maintenance of international peace and security is as great now as it ever has been. Not since the founding of the United Nations have we faced such uncertain times, when the contours of a new world order are emerging but not yet apparent.

We believe that a crucial aspect of the emerging international order is the interconnected nature of

our challenges, our security and our prosperity. It is increasingly clear that none of the problems facing humanity can be adequately addressed in isolation from one another. As the Prime Minister notes: "In the complex, inter-connected world in which we all live, countries cannot address the major challenges of today on their own".

Nor, we believe, can the challenges be addressed by States acting on the basis of partisanship and a narrow and outdated understanding of national interest. The increasingly apparent interconnectedness of development, security and human rights on a global scale confirms that peace and prosperity are indivisible, and that no sustainable benefit can be conferred on a nation or community if the welfare of the nations as a whole is ignored or neglected. This is not to set aside the national interest, but to understand it in its true context, because the interests of the part are best served today by considering the interests of the whole.

The international community needs to move beyond a community of nations bound by primarily economic relationships to a community with shared responsibilities for one another's well-being and security. In the words of the Bahá'í International Community's recent Statement to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, it needs to move "towards a new 'we'".¹

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes the new global order must be founded on the principle of the oneness of humankind: that we are a single people, inhabiting one planet; one human family bound together with a common destiny. This principle, once accepted and affirmed as a common understanding, provides the practical basis for the organisation of relationships between all states and nations. It calls for a wider loyalty, a greater aspiration than any that has hitherto animated the human race. Indeed, it provides the moral impetus needed to remould the institutions of international governance in a manner consistent with the needs of an ever-changing world.

Thus, in our view, the greatest contribution that Australia could make as a Security Council member in 2013-2014 would be to act at all times on the basis of the principle of the oneness of humankind. It should take upon itself, as a solemn moral and legal obligation, to act as a trustee for the entire community of nations; to protect and to serve all the members of our global social polity. In this way, Australia would truly set a new standard for international citizenship for the 21st century.

Priority areas

Guided and inspired by this underlying principle, there are three specific areas upon which we suggest Australia should focus as a member of the UN Security Council: human rights, gender equality, and interfaith and interreligious dialogue.

Human rights

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that as a member of the UN Security Council, Australia should commit to the global promotion, protection and realisation of human rights. Australia should actively promote more intensive engagement of the Security Council in this endeavour, including by promoting the principle that the realisation of human rights is essential for lasting international peace and security, thereby better focusing the attention of the Council on human rights issues.

Australia has a proud history of support for multilateral human rights instruments and institutions, and of promoting human rights through bilateral means. We would like to see Australia build on that

¹ "Sustaining Societies: Towards a New 'We'", Bahá'í International Community's Statement to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, June 2012, <http://www.bic.org/statements/sustaining-societies-towards-new-we>

history, and its position as a democratic nation in an increasingly important region of the world, to take on a role of international and regional human rights leadership. The Australian Bahá'í Community holds the view that the promotion and protection of human rights, undertaken within the context of the framework and standards established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is not just one among many important foreign policy objectives, but must be at the very heart of Australia's foreign policy.

We recommend that particular emphasis be placed on the right to freedom of religion and belief, which is one of the central and most challenging human rights issues shaping inter and intra-State relations today. The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is central to human development, as it makes possible the individual's search for meaning. In "Freedom to Believe", the Bahá'í International Community's Statement on the Freedom of Religion or Belief, we urged the United Nations to give serious consideration to four critical yet neglected issues related to this fundamental right: (1) the right to change one's religion or beliefs; (2) the right to share one's beliefs with others; (3) the responsibilities of the international community and national governments vis-à-vis marginalised and peacefully organized religious communities; and (4) the responsibilities of religious leaders vis-à-vis the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.² We encourage the Australian Government to take these issues into account in setting priorities for its Security Council membership.

Equality of men and women

The Australian Bahá'í Community commends the Government for its commitment to advancing gender equality both domestically and internationally. We agree with the observation in Australia's candidature brochure that women are powerful agents of change for peace and security; and that the more involved women are in the peace process as peacebuilders, the greater the likelihood of lasting peace and development.

Some 25 years ago, in a statement marking the International Year of Peace, the international governing body of the Bahá'í Faith observed:

The emancipation of women, the achievement of full equality between the sexes, is one of the most important, though less acknowledged prerequisites of peace. The denial of such equality perpetrates an injustice against one half of the world's population and promotes in men harmful attitudes and habits that are carried from the family to the workplace, to political life, and ultimately to international relations. There are no grounds, moral, practical, or biological, upon which such denial can be justified. Only as women are welcomed into full partnership in all fields of human endeavour will the moral and psychological climate be created in which international peace can emerge.³

Australia has already demonstrated its commitment in this area through the appointment of a Global Ambassador for Women and Girls. In the context of Security Council membership, Australia should vigilantly work for the inclusion of women in all facets of governance – not only in Member States, but also in all UN agencies and deliberations. This is not a privilege but a practical necessity for the achievement of the vital and complex goals before the Security Council.

² "Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", Bahá'í International Community's Statement on the Freedom of Religion or Belief, October 2005, <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/05-1001.htm>

³ "The Promise of World Peace", Universal House of Justice, available on-line at <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-7-2-1.html>

Interfaith dialogue and the role of religion

The Australian Bahá'í Community notes that one of the eight pillars of Australia's campaign for a Security Council seat is its commitment to interfaith and interreligious dialogue. We congratulate the Government for its support of interfaith initiatives which, aside from their intrinsic merit, also offer a strong platform for upholding the right to freedom of religion or belief.

The Australian Bahá'í Community was a pioneer of the interfaith movement in Australia, and remains a regular organiser of and participant in interfaith dialogue and projects. It is our view that religious prejudice is one of the last great barriers dividing humanity against itself, and that religious leaders bear a particular responsibility to guide their followers towards mutual understanding with those who think and believe differently.

Over the past decade or more, religion has emerged on the world stage as a subject of consuming global importance. The appropriate role of religion in the public sphere is one of the most pressing issues of our time. The existing debate has, however, been driven by the voices and actions of extreme proponents on both sides – those who impose their religious ideology by force, whose most visible expression is terrorism; and those who deny any place for expressions of faith or belief in the public sphere. Neither extreme is representative of the view of the majority of humanity, and neither promotes a sustainable peace. In fact, a careful historical analysis reveals that the periods of greatest advancement in human civilisation have been those where both faith and reason were permitted to work together, drawing on the resources of the totality of human insight and experience.⁴

Located in a region of great religious diversity, and with a national commitment to supporting interfaith harmony within its own borders, Australia is well placed to advance this discourse and to promote interfaith dialogue at the international level during a term as a Security Council member. Such interfaith initiatives should go beyond a passive tolerance of each other's worldviews. What is required is an active search for those common values and moral principles which will lift up the condition of every woman, man and child. Trusting in the divine inspiration that has stirred every great religion, we are confident that such values can be identified and actively promoted.

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The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the consultation on Australia's role on the UN Security Council. We look forward to learning the outcome of the election in the General Assembly in October 2012. We are confident that, should Australia be elected as a Security Council member, it has the potential to make a significant contribution to the progress and well-being of humanity at this crucial time in the maturation of the global community.

Australian Bahá'í Community
August 2012

⁴ "The Search for Values in an Age of Transition", Bahá'í International Community's Statement on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the United Nations, October 2005, <http://www.bic.org/statements/search-values-age-transition>