



Australian Bahá'í Community

Submission by the Australian Bahá'í Community on the National Anti-Racism Partnership and Strategy

The Australian Bahá'í Community welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussion paper on a National Anti-Racism Partnership and Strategy. We commend the Australian Government on its aim of promoting a clear understanding in the Australian community of what racism is, and how it can be prevented and reduced.

Australian Bahá'í Community

This submission is based on the experience of the Australian Bahá'í Community in striving to build a diverse and united community.

Australian Bahá'ís are part of a worldwide religion founded more than 160 years ago. With a membership of more than five million people, the global Bahá'í community reflects the diversity of the entire human race. The Australian Bahá'í Community was established in 1920. Australian Bahá'ís come from diverse backgrounds: according to the 2006 national census, the major birthplaces of members of our community, apart from Australia, are the Middle East, the United Kingdom, maritime South-East Asia, New Zealand, Northern America, Southern Asia, Western Europe, and Southern and East Africa. Drawing on this rich diversity, Australian Bahá'ís endeavour to work together unitedly for a common goal of promoting a peaceful, prosperous world civilisation based on equality and justice.

The teachings of our Faith have long identified racism as a major barrier to the building of a better world. This year we are marking the centenary of an historic nine-month journey undertaken by the then head of our Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to America in 1912, where He spoke to many audiences in every social space about the vital need to overcome racial prejudice.

More recently, in 1986, the international governing body of our Faith, the Universal House of Justice, wrote:

Racism, one of the most baneful and persistent evils, is a major barrier to peace. Its practice perpetrates too outrageous a violation of the dignity of human beings to be countenanced under any pretext. Racism retards the unfoldment of the boundless potentialities of its victims, corrupts its perpetrators, and blights human progress. Recognition of the oneness of mankind, implemented by appropriate legal measures, must be universally upheld if this problem is to be overcome.¹

¹ <http://info.bahai.org/article-1-7-2-1.html>

Objective 1: Create awareness of racism and how it affects individuals and the broader community

What can we learn from how Australia has dealt with racism in the past? What achievements should we build on? What mistakes should we learn from?

Enacting and enforcing legal protections for equality and freedom from discrimination is an essential foundation for human rights and human dignity. The Australian Bahá'í Community commends Australia's support and ratification of various international conventions against racial discrimination including the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, and the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Through its support and endorsement of these international conventions, and the enactment of domestic legislation in the form of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*, the Australian Government has demonstrated its continued commitment to the elimination of racism and the promotion of equality for people of all national and ethnic backgrounds.

While an appropriate legal framework is necessary to prevent and deal with racism in key aspects of social and economic life, experience has shown that it is not sufficient. Racial prejudice and inequality is stubbornly surviving legal reforms, in Australia and internationally. The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that full equality requires not only deliberate attempts to change the legal, political and economic structures of society, but, equally importantly, the transformation of individuals whose values, in different ways, sustain inequalities. It requires a new understanding of who we are, our purpose in life, and how we relate to one another – an understanding that will compel us to reshape our lives and thereby our society.

What information would be useful to include in a campaign to prevent and reduce racism?

Racism originates not in the skin, but in the human mind. Remedies to racial prejudice must accordingly address those mental illusions that have given rise to false concepts of superiority and inferiority among human populations.

At the root of all forms of discrimination is the mistaken idea that humankind is composed of separate and distinct races or peoples, and that those sub-groups possess varying intellectual, moral and/or physical capacities, which in turn justify different forms of treatment.

The reality is that all human beings, regardless of differences in colour and physical looks, belong to the same race – the human race. This is a truth that is fully endorsed by both religion and science. Anthropology, physiology, psychology, sociology and, most recently, genetics, in its decoding of the human genome, demonstrate that there is only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life. The Human Genome Project has concluded that there is no scientific basis for race and that “races” cannot be distinguished genetically.²

Accordingly, we believe that the principle of the oneness of humanity should be the cornerstone of any effort to prevent and reduce racism. Since racism is a mental construct and has nothing to do with physical reality, education alone can retrain our minds to think in terms of our essential oneness, rather than superficial differences.

In emphasising the fundamental oneness of all humanity, we do not seek to deny the magnificent diversity that characterises the human species and, indeed, the people of Australia. On the contrary, we consider the infinite diversity of humanity – whether cultural, religious,

² See www.ornl.gov/hgmis/elsi/minorities.html.

linguistic, or otherwise – to be a reflection of the bounty and perfection of Creation. We recognise that national and ethnic heritage can be a source of pride and a backdrop for positive social development. If, however, anti-racism programs were to be based on assumptions that regard society as unalterably divided – a virtually impermeable “community of communities” – this would risk reinforcing old barriers and insularities, rather than assisting in the building of a new community that is genuinely united in its diversity.

How could we better acknowledge the contributions to Australia of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse communities?

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that racism remains the most fundamental barrier which has continued to retard full national reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians, despite the investment of material resources. Healing the wounds of the past and building a society in which people of diverse backgrounds live as members of one family are among the most urgent issues confronting Australia today.

Indigenous people, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, must have the right to participate fully and actively in the life of society and in decisions that affect them. The vitality of our national community derives from the degree to which it is able to develop and strengthen the capacities of the individuals and institutions of which it is comprised. Every human being possesses the capacity to develop spiritually and intellectually and to become a source of support and advantage to others. Each individual possesses inestimable talents which can be developed and manifested in service to the common good. Too often, indigenous Australians and members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities are perceived as helpless people, overwhelmed by their circumstances and needs, rather than capable agents of change in their communities. Government programs in this area should aim to create an environment in which all individuals, irrespective of their ethnic or national background, can cultivate their capacities to become protagonists of their development and to contribute to the well-being of their families and communities. In this way, they will foster the capacity of all members of the community to play their role in the creation of a more just and inclusive society.

In addition to the much-needed programs to address the unrelieved deprivation faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, enduring barriers of prejudice should be removed through positive measures to foster association between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians at all levels, no matter how insignificant such opportunities may seem. This is the task on which reconciliation is founded, as no real change will come about without close association and friendship. This should not be a one-way process of drawing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the dominant lifestyle on a so-called “equal basis”. Rather, non-indigenous Australians must come to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have much to offer to humanity through their spiritual perspective, understanding and view of life.

A national program of education based on genuine respect for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their cultures and languages, and emphasising the values of appreciation for cultures other than one's own and respect for differences, would be an important step.

Objective 2: Identify, promote and build on good practice initiatives to prevent and reduce racism

What are the priority areas in which we should be addressing racism (for example: employment, education, sport, the media, cyber-racism?)

Education is not only the shortest route out of poverty; it is also the shortest route out of prejudice. The Australian Bahá'í Community believes educational programs for children, youth and adults will be indispensable for addressing racism in Australia. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the goal of education is not only “the full development of the human personality”, but also the promotion of “understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial, ethnic or religious groups”. 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.

Any campaign seeking to address racism and its horrific effects on society cannot ignore the impact of racism on women and children. As a result of the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, women belonging to minority ethnic, religious or other cultural groups are often most glaringly affected by discrimination, prejudice and intolerance in Australian society. When women are affected, children are also affected, because women are the first educators of the next generation, and a woman's education has a tremendous impact on her family's physical, social and economic well-being. Accordingly, we recommend 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. We believe the prosperity of the human race rests on the recognition of the equal rights of women, their full participation in the life of society, their right to self-expression and self-determination, and their freedom from all forms of discrimination, including racism.

Given the immense power wielded by major media to influence public opinion, those who work in the media are obliged to approach their task with justice and equity. Many people working in the press, radio and television strive to achieve balanced, accurate and sensitive reporting, and their positive contribution towards overcoming racism in Australia should be acknowledged and applauded. Conversely, the negative impact of inflammatory and ill-informed reporting can be profound: public misconceptions, once created, are extremely difficult to dispel. Accordingly we would support measures to ensure that all media organisations fulfil their obligation to be socially responsible, fair, accurate, thorough, comprehensive and balanced in their reporting.

The Internet is dramatically reshaping patterns of communication and information sharing. On the positive side, the rise of new forms of collaboration, social outreach and creative expression has tremendous potential to build bonds and understanding between members of the human family, leading to true cooperative action towards peace and human well-being. At the same time, however, there is no doubt that new technologies have provided powerful and far-reaching tools and networks for those who promote racial vilification and hatred. The Australian Bahá'í Community has not been immune to the rise of hate Web sites and on-line attacks. We believe there is room for greater vigilance in monitoring cyber-racism, including Australian hosted Web sites of extremist organisations.

What measures should governments at all levels take to address racism?

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that the greatest safeguard against racism is a long-term preventive strategy rooted in efforts to educate children and adults alike. Education that instils in hearts and minds an awareness of and sensitivity to the human rights and equality of all persons constitutes an essential tool for preventing and reducing racism. In the final analysis, individuals are respected – or discriminated against – by other individuals, even if they are acting in an official capacity. Accordingly, it is essential that governments put in place, and provide adequate resources for, educative programs that touch the hearts, and elevate the behaviour, of all members of the community.

This educational program should, in the first instance, emphasise the essential oneness of all people regardless of colour or creed. It should enable Australians at the individual level to develop a mutual regard for the essential humanity and dignity of each other, and recognise that in the end we are part of one human family. In the Bahá'í view, respect for different cultures can only be achieved if we are able to perceive, underlying our cultural variations, our essential unity as one human race. Mutual respect will not come about through separatism or antagonism.

The program should further locate racism within the human rights discourse. That is, racism, whether it takes the form of outright persecution or subtle forms of discrimination such as exclusion from employment, housing, education, sports and other opportunities, is an abuse of an individual's basic human rights.

What role can business, the arts, sporting organisations, community groups, service organisations and the media play in addressing racism?

The challenge of creating a society in which all members can develop to their full potential is not a task for government alone. We all share responsibility for supporting and implementing the changes required. The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that business, the arts, sporting organisations, community groups, service organisations and the media can all play a valuable role in addressing racism. Neighbours, educators, health workers, employers, politicians, religious leaders, police, media professionals – all share responsibility for the promotion of equality and the prevention of discrimination.

How can we involve young people in addressing racism?

Youth is a pivotal period of human development. Young people represent a tremendous source of intellectual and social potential that can be developed and channelled towards socially constructive ends, including addressing issues of racism and racial discrimination.

The Australian Bahá'í Community recommends that particular attention be devoted to policies and programs that meet the needs and help fulfil the potential of those between the ages of 12 and 15, known as “junior youth”. At this pivotal age, young people are beginning to develop a sense of personal moral responsibility and decision making, are refining their critical thinking skills, and are eager to explore the many issues to which their consciences are slowly awakening. Many have already borne the weight of life's hardships and have the ability to think deeply about the world around them. As they navigate this critical period in their lives, these young people must be given the tools to recognise the moral issues underlying the choices they make. This stage of development presents an important opportunity for parents, communities, and institutions to help young people not only to develop a positive identity, but also to elevate their thinking and to adopt an outward-looking orientation, which inspires them to work towards the betterment of the community.

Empowering young people to be agents of change within society should incorporate creative approaches that will engage their various faculties. Funding and supporting creative projects involving youth is highly encouraged. Approaching community youth groups and requesting their support for educational programs that target racism can yield significant results.

Can you give examples of strategies that you have seen used or been part of that have been successful in preventing or reducing racism? Why were they effective?

In our own programs of spiritual and moral education, the Australian Bahá'í Community offers a Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program for girls and boys aged 12 to 15 years from all backgrounds. By developing their spiritual qualities, their intellectual capabilities and their

capacities for service to the community, the program helps participants to develop a strong sense of purpose and become empowered to reach their potential, while contributing to the advancement of society. The program adopts a participatory mode of learning as groups of junior youth engage in activities such as artistic expression, discussion, drama, cooperative games, study of literature, story telling and acts of community service. The initial results of the program make us optimistic about its potential, and we are building up our resources to make it more widely available.

What tools or resources do we have at the community level which could be better utilised in the fight against racism?

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that religious organisations and religious leaders have an important role to play in addressing racism. Religious communities have historically played a significant and ongoing role in promoting human rights, including teaching the fundamental moral equality of all human beings, which is a cornerstone for addressing racism. The unique contribution to be made by religious communities is to voice the need for the spiritual aspects of life not to be neglected, as the health of the community depends on achieving a balance between spiritual and material aspirations. The support of religious leaders and people of faith needs to be harnessed in ending racism and racial discrimination.

For our part, the Bahá'í community has been involved in community building based on the principle of the oneness of humanity for over a century. As stated by the Bahá'í International Community in its statement to the 2009 Durban Review Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance:

Our programme for the realization of racial unity is at once social, spiritual and organic. Recognizing that commitment to a spiritual principle has social implications, the Bahá'í system of community organization employs practical measures to encourage the participation of minorities. The principle of racial equality is taught, and individuals are encouraged to identify and overcome old patterns of behaviour.³

Bahá'í communities in Australia and around the world have sponsored or participated extensively in activities aimed at the eradication of racism and racial discrimination, including numerous public meetings, conferences, educational programs, youth workshops, television and video campaigns, newspaper articles, radio programs, neighbourhood dialogues, and exhibits that specifically seek to combat racism. Further, drawing on the creative spirit of grassroots participation, Bahá'ís in a number of countries have established race unity committees, with diverse membership, which have developed programs to combat racial prejudice and to create bonds of mutual respect among people in their local communities. These committees have attempted to assist Bahá'ís to free themselves of their own racial prejudices and, beyond that, to contribute to the elimination of racial prejudice in society at large through extensive collaboration with leaders in government, education and religion.

How could these experiences be shared to help promote good practice?

At the present time, the Australian Bahá'í Community is part of the worldwide Bahá'í community's endeavours to systematically transform society by empowering individuals to become agents of change at the grassroots. The framework for action guiding these activities is rooted in a dynamic of learning characterised by action, reflection, and consultation. Across Australia, we have set into motion neighbourhood-level processes that seek to empower

³ <http://bic.org/statements/statement-2009-durban-review-conference>

individuals of all ages to recognise and develop their spiritual capacities and to channel their collective energies towards service to humanity and the betterment of their communities. These processes are open to all members of the community, and we welcome inquiries or participation by those who would like to partner with us.

Objective 3: Empower communities and individuals to take action to prevent and reduce racism and seek redress when it occurs

What strategies or approaches can be used to help individuals and communities who experience racism to speak up or take action? If you have experienced racism, what would have helped you to speak up or take action?

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that systematic programs of human rights education are indispensable to the realisation of full equality in Australia. We have welcomed the Australian Government's commitment to make human rights education the centrepiece of Australia's Human Rights Framework, and we acknowledge the efforts of the Australian Human Rights Commission and its Commissioners over many years in this field. All Australians need not only to learn about their own rights, but to develop respect for the rights of humanity in general.

Those who suffer most from racism are often least able to seek help. Many people who are subjected to racism in their daily lives, especially those who are recent arrivals to Australia, have come from countries that lack a culture of respect and protection for human rights. They are likely to have experienced broken legal systems characterised by the oppressive and arbitrary application of laws, and may therefore find themselves submitting to unequal treatment and discrimination. Ensuring that such people are aware of their rights as human beings, and as Australians and citizens of this country, can go a long way in preventing human rights abuses, including acts of racism and discrimination. This educational program should explain the right of each individual to freedom from all forms of discrimination, outline the various forms that racism can take, and convey the legal means of redress available, where to make complaints, and how to stand up against racism.

Human rights education, it should be noted, is not limited solely to the provision of information. As defined by the United Nations, it consists of three dimensions:

- (a) knowledge: provision of information about human rights and mechanisms for their protection;
- (b) values, beliefs and attitudes: promotion of a human rights culture through the development of values, beliefs and attitudes which uphold human rights;
- (c) action: encouragement to take action to defend human rights and prevent human rights abuses

What strategies or approaches can be used to help bystanders address racism where and when it occurs?

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes the essence of any successful program of social change, including those which aim to end discrimination on the basis of race, is the understanding that the individual has a spiritual or moral dimension which shapes their life's purpose and their responsibilities towards their family, their community and the world. The development of individuals' moral and spiritual capabilities is an essential element in the quest

to prevent and eliminate racism, as it will empower bystanders to identify and speak out against racism when and where it occurs.

We appreciate that promoting specific morals or values may be controversial, as such efforts have often been associated with repressive practices and narrowly defined visions of the common good. But moral capabilities, when articulated in a manner consistent with the ideals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and aimed at fostering the spiritual, social and intellectual development of all persons, represent a key element of the kind of transformation required for a society in which there is true equality to take shape. Such capabilities must be anchored in the central social and spiritual principle of our time, namely the interdependence and interconnectedness of humanity as a whole. These capabilities can and should be taught in schools, but also need to take root in the family and the community.

As Bahá'ís, we are inspired by the spiritual teachings of the Founder of our Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, who stated over 100 years ago:

O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.

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