



## Australian Bahá'í Community

The Australian Bahá'í Community thanks the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee for this opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into the provisions of the Australian Human Rights Commission Legislation Bill 2003.

### **Human Rights Education**

For many years the Australian Bahá'í Community has advocated that systematic programs of human rights education constitute an essential tool for the promotion and implementation of international human rights standards. Conversely, the general lack of awareness of human rights is an obstacle to the full protection of human rights. We welcome, therefore, the emphasis given to human rights education in the Bill

The *Plan of Action* prepared by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995-2004) defines human rights education as "training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes which are directed to:

- The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;
- The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;
- The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free society; and
- The furtherance of the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

Human rights education, if it is to succeed, must seek to transform individual attitudes and behaviour and thereby establish, within the community, a new "culture" of respect for human rights. Only such a change in the fundamental social outlook of every individual, whether a government official or an ordinary citizen, can bring about the universal observance of human rights principles in the daily lives of people. In the final analysis, the human rights of an individual are respected and protected - or violated - by other individuals, even if they are acting in an official capacity.

Accordingly, it is essential to touch the hearts, and elevate the behaviour, of all human beings, if, in the words of the Plan of Action, human rights are to be transformed "from the expression of abstract norms" to the "reality" of the "social, economic, cultural and political conditions" experienced by people in their daily lives.

## **Responsibilities**

The renaming of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), in particular its suggested by-line “Human rights – everyone’s responsibility”, is an important symbolic step. Legal protections for human rights and freedom from government oppression are unquestionably essential to human dignity. Government, however, is not the only agency in society that has the capacity to affect human rights.

A sense of collective responsibility may play an important role in advancing human rights. In the Bahá’í perspective, the concept of "responsibility" in the context of human rights encompasses the responsibility devolving upon every person, as a divinely-created being, to recognize the essential oneness of the human race and to promote the human rights of others with this motivation.

Thus, it seems to us essential to broaden the conceptual framework for addressing human rights problems from an adversarial paradigm - pitting the government against the individual citizen - to a cooperative one, where we consider relations among all human beings as members of one community. In this context, everyone has an essential role to play in implementing fundamental human rights.

The Bahá’í Community believes that recognition of the responsibility of every human being to promote the human rights of others would contribute to the advancement of human rights.

## **Structure**

In October 1991, the United Nations Centre for Human Rights convened an international workshop to review and update information on existing national human rights institutions. Participants included representatives of national institutions, States, the United Nations, its specialized agencies, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

In addition to exchanging views on existing arrangements, the workshop participants drew up a comprehensive series of recommendations on the role, composition, status and functions of national human rights instruments. These recommendations, which were endorsed by the Commission on Human Rights in March 1992 (resolution 1992/54) and by the General Assembly in its resolution [A/RES/48/134](#) of 20 December 1993, are commonly known as the “Paris Principles”.

The full text of the “Paris Principles” is available at <http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu6/2/fs19.htm#annex> . Key criteria in the “Paris Principles” are:

- Independence guaranteed by statute or constitution
- Autonomy from government
- Pluralism, including in membership
- A broad mandate based on universal human rights standards
- Adequate powers of investigation
- Sufficient resources.

The Australian Bahá'í Community suggests that any restructuring of HREOC should be considered by the committee in light of the "Paris Principles". In addition to consideration of the proposed amendments for their consistency with the Paris Principles, we believe this inquiry presents an important opportunity for review of the existing provisions of HREOC legislation with a view to recommendations to bring Australian practise into conformity with the minimum international standards set out above.

### **Conclusion**

In raising the points we have set out above, one central consideration underlies the Bahá'í approach. This consideration is the essential oneness of the human family. Consideration of the provisions of the Australian Human Rights Commission Legislation Bill provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with our fellow human beings. We believe that a question that can be appropriately addressed in this context, is the contribution that we as a community can make to the welfare of humanity as a whole. As a community inspired by Faith we add our voice to the wealth of testimony by all members of the human family that human rights are universal and aspired to by all.

Tessa Scrine  
Executive Officer Government Relations  
April 2003