

# AUSTRALIAN Bahá'í Report

Volume 13, Issue 2 - June 2009

A newsletter of the Australian Bahá'í community

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## Governor opens Bahá'í Centre of Learning

The Governor of Tasmania, the Hon Peter Underwood AC, officially opened the Tasmanian Bahá'í Centre of Learning on 29 May 2009.

In his address to 300 people at the opening ceremony, the Governor praised the design and intended use of the building, which is located in a prominent position in the heart of Hobart.

"This Centre of Learning will make a significant contribution to the religious and intellectual life of Hobart," said Mr Underwood, who unveiled a plaque to commemorate the occasion.

"It is a tribute to the skill and ingenuity of the architects and builders," he said.

The opening ceremony was webcast and watched live by viewers in other parts of Australia and in other countries.

The design of the building has won accolades for the attention paid to environmental sustainability through the innovative use of materials, the conservation of water and low energy consumption.

Among the distinctive aspects of the design are a domed roof covering a 300-seat auditorium, and a glassed courtyard enclosing a tree that continues to flourish within the building itself.

In his address, the Governor praised such Bahá'í principles as the abolition of all forms of prejudice, the equality of women and men, the independent investigation of truth, and the establishment of a global commonwealth of nations.

"These values are values of right thinking men and women and should be pursued at every opportunity," Mr Underwood said.

"We are indeed fortunate to have a community of people living amongst us who subscribe to those ideals," he said.

Among the dignitaries attending were members of the Federal and State Parliaments, municipal leaders, leaders of religious communities, and representatives of the business community, educational institutions, non-governmental organisations and the media.



Peter Underwood AC, Governor of Tasmania, speaking at the opening of the Bahá'í Centre of Learning.

Bahá'í representatives included members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia and the Continental Board of Counsellors and a former member of the International Teaching Centre at the Bahá'í World Centre.

The program also included a Welcome to Country, a prayer, a reading of the charter of the Centre of Learning, and musical performances.

Principal architect Stuart Hall spoke about the development and construction of the Centre, the purpose of which is to provide programs that enable the insights of religion, science, and the arts to contribute to the spiritual, intellectual and social development of individuals and groups.

The Bahá'í Centre of Learning serves the wider Tasmanian community as well as providing a venue for Bahá'í activities. More than 50 organisations have held events there since it opened its doors in October last year.

The Bahá'í Centre of Learning is the headquarters of the Bahá'í Council for Tasmania.

Funded by the Naveed Foundation, the Centre of Learning is dedicated to the memory of former Hobart Bahá'í community members Soheila Mirkazemi and her son Naveed, who died as a result of a motor vehicle accident in the city in 2000.

# Delegates elect national governing body



*Standing L to R: Kath Podger, Golshah Naghdy, Fariborz Moshirian and Bijan Samali*

*Seated L to R: Vahid Saberi, Arini Beaumaris, Tessa Scrine, Fiona McDonald and John Walker*

Bahá'ís from throughout Australia elected the national governing council of their Faith at the Bahá'í national convention held in Sydney from 24-26 April 2009.

More than 90 delegates

from throughout Australia cast their secret ballots in an election conducted without nominations or campaigning, in accordance with Bahá'í electoral procedures.

Those elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia for the coming year are Arini Beaumaris (Gold Coast), Fiona McDonald (Perth), Fariborz Moshirian (Sydney), Golshah Naghdy (Wollongong), Kath Podger (Sydney), Vahid Saberi (Ballina), Bijan Samali

(Sydney), Tessa Scrine (Canberra), and John Walker (Sydney).

The National Spiritual Assembly subsequently announced its officers, who include a new chairperson and secretary.

The new chairperson is Vahid Saberi, who works as the Executive Director of Population Health, Planning and Performance for the North Coast Area Health Service.

The new secretary is Arini Beaumaris, who has held a range of managerial positions in the education sector, from pre-school to university levels, in Australia, Canada, Europe and the United States. Since 2006 she has been an independent consultant on communications, education, management and leadership.

In May, Ms Beaumaris moved from the Gold Coast to Sydney to begin her new role.

## Reconciliation: change is possible

The first indigenous person to serve on the national governing body of the Bahá'í Faith in Australia was the guest speaker at an event at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney to mark National Reconciliation Week.

Elizabeth Hindson was first elected as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia in 1968, and has served the Bahá'í community in various capacities since that time.

In her talk, Ms Hindson recalled being raised by her grandparents on a cattle station in South East Queensland.

She said her childhood was "idyllic" until the family moved to a larger town. On her first day at the local school, the principal "made me aware of colour for the first time" when, referring to her family, he warned the student assembly against making any comment about the colour of the new students.

"Until then I had never experienced discrimination," she said.

Ms Hindson later moved to Brisbane where she qualified as a social worker. For most of

her professional life she worked in senior roles for the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs in the Queensland Government.

In Australia, 37 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children complete year 12, compared to 74 per cent of non-indigenous Australians, Ms Hindson said.

"There are big discrepancies and we need to close those gaps," she said.

Ms Hindson emphasised that change is possible and it is important to keep a positive attitude.

"We have come a long way although there's still a long way to go," she said.

Speaking from a Bahá'í perspective, Ms Hindson said she believed all people were one family and she hoped reconciliation would enable people to come together.

"We need to be proud of our culture and help to preserve it," she said.

"Diversity enriches us all."

A special service for reconciliation was held in the House of Worship following Ms Hindson's presentation.

# Prime Minister sends congratulatory message to anniversary celebrations

A message of congratulations from the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, was read to guests at a reception prior to a special service marking the 75th anniversary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia.

The Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs and Settlement Services, Laurie Ferguson, read the message and then said how strongly he identified with the Bahá'í teachings, including the Bahá'í Faith's commitment to human rights.

The reception, held on 26 April 2009, began with a Welcome to Country by a representative of the Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council, Michael West.

A keynote speaker at the reception was Peter Khan, a member of the international governing council of the Bahá'í Faith, the Universal House of Justice.

Dr Khan said he wished to convey his greetings and congratulations to the National Spiritual Assembly, describing it as "one of the most mature and seasoned" of the 180 national Bahá'í governing bodies in the world.

Dr Khan said that from its foundation in 1934 the National Spiritual Assembly had gone about fulfilling the central mission of the Bahá'í Faith - to be a source of harmony, unity and understanding among diverse people.

A spokesperson for the National Spiritual Assembly, Golshah Naghdy, told the reception that the Assembly was motivated by the central theme of the Bahá'í Faith, the unity of humanity.

"That concept runs into every aspect of our relationships in all levels of our organisation," Dr Naghdy said.

The Assembly had a vision of a joyous, united society that was materially and spiritually prosperous, she said.

The chairperson of the event, Tessa Scrine, noted that the national governing body of the Bahá'ís in Iran had been founded the same year as Australia's but had been dissolved by the Iranian authorities in 1983 as part of the ongoing persecution of the Bahá'í community in that country.



*L to R: Janet Khan, Peter Khan, Laurie Ferguson, Golshah Naghdy and Tessa Scrine at the 75th anniversary celebrations*

"The Bahá'ís of Iran are continually in our thoughts and prayers," said Ms Scrine, a member of the Australian National Spiritual Assembly.

Among other guests at the function, held in the grounds of the Bahá'í Temple, were representatives of Sydney's diverse faith communities, the Mayors of Pittwater and Warringah, prominent jurist Justice John Dowd, and two State MPs, Judy Hopwood, the member for Hornsby, and Chris Hartcher, the member for Terrigal.

Also present were 25 current and former members of the National Spiritual Assembly, including the first Aboriginal member, Elizabeth Hindson.

Following the reception, the participants attended the service in the Bahá'í House of Worship, along with other Bahá'ís and guests.

The previous evening, Dr Peter Khan and Dr Janet Khan, both former members of the National Spiritual Assembly, addressed some 2500 Bahá'ís at an anniversary event in the Sydney Convention Centre at Darling Harbour.



*Mayor of Pittwater, David James (left), speaking with National Assembly member John Walker*





*Jim Turnour MP speaks in support of the House of Representatives motion*

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## Parliament calls for release of Bahá'í leaders

The Australian Parliament has called on Iran to release the seven Bahá'í leaders who have been imprisoned in that country for more than a year.

Six Members of Parliament from both major parties spoke in support of a notice of motion in the House of Representatives on 25 May 2009.

The motion noted with "serious concern" that the detained Bahá'ís, who have been held since March and May 2008, have had no access to legal representation and have not been subject to due legal process.

It expressed concern about charges of spying, insulting religious sanctities and propaganda against the Islamic Republic and that these could attract the death penalty.

The Parliament called upon Iran to respect rights to freedom of religion and the peaceful exercise of freedom of expression and association in accordance with international human rights conventions.

### Extreme religious persecution

The MP who introduced the motion, the member for Leichhardt, Jim Turnour, called on Iran to drop the charges against the seven Bahá'ís.

"The Australian Government is concerned that these charges are part of a pattern of official discrimination against members of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran," Mr Turnour said.

"More recently, a number of incidents indicate that there has been a resurgence of extreme religious persecution against the Bahá'ís, which is clearly disturbing," he said.

The member for Isaacs, Mark Dreyfus, said that to be a Bahá'í in Iran is "to live with the fear of state sanctioned abuse hanging over your family and your community".

Mr Dreyfus referred to the "long catalogue of oppression and mistreatment" stretching back years and including the abduction of other Bahá'í leaders and the hanging of 10 Bahá'í women, the youngest 17 years old.

"In the face of dawn raids on their homes, the desecration of their cemeteries with bulldozers, the vilification of Bahá'í children in their classrooms, the disbaring of Bahá'ís from designated professions and threats against Muslims who associate with Bahá'ís, the

community has shown substantial bravery," Mr Dreyfus said.

The member for Cowan, Luke Simpkins, said the charges had no validity and were inconsistent with Bahá'í teachings.

Mr Simpkins said that a new charge of "spreading corruption in the world" that has apparently been levelled against the leaders "has nothing to do with offences, and everything to do with political control and religious persecution."

### Foreign Minister

The member for Hindmarsh, Steve Georganas, said that on 17 April 2009 the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, conveyed the Australian Government's serious concerns about the imprisoned Bahá'ís directly to the Iranian foreign minister.

"Over the past year the Australian Government has regularly raised its concerns about the seven Bahá'í detainees with the Iranian authorities and will continue to do so," Mr Georganas said.

"Others who have spoken out this year in condemnation of the actions of the Iranian authorities against the Bahá'ís include the European Union and the governments of Great Britain and the United States, as well as many parliamentarians in Brazil, Canada and Germany," he said.

The Member for O'Connor, Wilson Tuckey, said he had found Bahá'ís to be people of peace and good will. The charge of spying was "ridiculous", he said.

"The Bahá'í just say, 'Can we please have the freedom to act in accordance with our faith?'," Mr Tuckey said.

"This is an important motion which, above all else, deals with religious freedom and the prevention of persecution, particularly on religious grounds," Mr Tuckey said.

The member for Longman, Jon Sullivan, said the seven imprisoned Bahá'ís have relatives in Australia and "it is important that we as Australians support our fellow Australians of the Bahá'í Faith".

"As has been said, the Bahá'í people are a wonderful, brave, peace-loving people," Mr Sullivan said.

## Australian Bahá'í attends UN forum on status of women

A member of the Australian Bahá'í Community attended this year's session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women.

Katina Jones, the Adelaide-based CEO of Equals International, joined 30 delegates from 18 countries on the Bahá'í International Community's delegation to the Commission, held at the UN Headquarters in New York from 2-13 March 2009.

Ms Jones, who first represented the Australian Bahá'í Community at the Commission in 1996, saw a change at the 2009 session.

"This year I noticed there was increased receptivity to listening to the solutions offered by faith-based organisations," Ms Jones said.

More than 1150 people from 150 countries attended the Commission. Its priority theme was "equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS".

In its statement to the Commission, the Bahá'í International Community said that the equal sharing of responsibilities was an integral component of the establishment of relationships

rooted in justice.

The equality of men and women is "attainable and urgently needed," the Bahá'í International Community said.

To be enduring, such change requires "a transformation of human values," including a fundamental rethinking in the way that boys are socialised to become men, it said.

The Bahá'í International Community urged that special attention be given to the education of young people aged 12-15 years who are leaving behind childhood and beginning to develop their sense of personal moral responsibility and decision making.

For boys, efforts in this direction should provide "the tools to develop the moral courage to take on new roles and responsibilities, especially those traditionally associated with the contributions of girls," the Bahá'í International Community said.

"For girls, such efforts should provide the tools to discover and to begin to develop their broad-ranging capacities in all arenas of human endeavour," it said.



Katina Jones

## Adelaide artist creates wall of wisdom

A mystical work by Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, was the centrepiece and inspiration of a recent exhibition by Adelaide artist Siamak Fallah at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia.

On the inside walls of the gallery, the artist used a fine-line lead pencil to copy the complete text of *The Seven Valleys*, a work of Bahá'í scripture that traces the journey of the human soul.

That task was a journey of endurance in itself. It took Mr Fallah two weeks to set up the exhibition, and nine days and nights to complete the writing.

The writings are within floor-to-ceiling Persian numerals, giving an unusual effect when stepping away from the walls.

"It's very playful, like being in a forest of words and numbers," says Mr Fallah, 43, who explains that the art work is an attempt to

address "the notion of oneness". It also deals with issues of exile, persecution and love.

Called *Az-Zaban-e Modari: Labaik Labaik no. 1 (From the Mother Tongue: Here am I. Here am I)*, the solo exhibition also includes videos of the extensive gardens that surround the Bahá'í Shrines in Haifa and Acre at the Bahá'í World Centre in Israel.

"The sense of beauty resonates with the text," Mr Fallah says.

Born near Shiraz in Iran, Mr Fallah came to Australia as a Bahá'í refugee in 1985. In 1998, he graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the South Australian School of Art.

Mr Fallah's previous exhibitions were at Greenaway Art Gallery, Nexus Multicultural Arts Centre, and Artspace Sydney.



Artist Siamak Fallah at work

## Oneness of humanity inspired service



*Madge Featherstone*

A memorial service in honour of distinguished Australian Bahá'í Madge Lilian Featherstone was held at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Sydney on Sunday 7 June 2009.

Mrs Featherstone passed away in Brisbane in February at the age of 97.

Mrs Featherstone made historic contributions to the Australian Bahá'í Community for more than six decades and also served the Faith throughout the Pacific and in many other countries around the world.

From the time she became a Bahá'í in 1944, Mrs Featherstone devoted herself to fulfilling the Bahá'í goal of a just world society based on the oneness of humanity.

When her husband Collis Featherstone (1913-1990) was appointed to the high rank in the Faith of Hand of the Cause of God in 1957, Mrs Featherstone was a pillar of support.

She devoted herself to raising their five children, Kaye, Margaret, Joan, Mariette and Geoffrey, and looked after the family business while her husband was travelling for the Faith.

In 1961, Mrs Featherstone was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia.

In later years she accompanied Mr Featherstone on his travels and worked for the development of the Bahá'í community.

Mrs Featherstone travelled with her husband on visits to remote villages in the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere under arduous conditions of climate, food, transport and accommodation.

Mrs Featherstone often addressed women's gatherings with her trademark encouragement, wit and love.

Mr Featherstone died in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1990. In the years that followed, Mrs Featherstone kept travelling for the Bahá'í Faith.

In her 80s, Mrs Featherstone visited Bahá'ís in countries including the Cook Islands, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Vietnam and Sarawak.

In 2003, when she was in her 90s, Mrs Featherstone travelled to Vanuatu to attend the celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the Faith there.

In a tribute, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia said: "Her record of service testifies to her obedience, steadfastness, persistence, devotion and self-sacrifice."

## University Medal awarded for Bahá'í thesis

The University of Sydney has awarded its prestigious University Medal to a Sydney student for her dissertation on the campaign to end the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

May Samali, 22, was the only student graduating with the Bachelor of Economic and Social Sciences degree to receive the Medal, which is awarded in recognition of outstanding academic achievement.

Ms Samali wrote her dissertation for her Honours year, in which she majored in Government and International Relations.

Her thesis examined the strategies used by the Bahá'í International Community in its efforts to end the Iranian Government's persecution of Bahá'ís.

Ms Samali is now completing a Bachelor of

Laws degree at the university.

"I hope to pursue a career that allows me to play an active part in shaping public policy and assisting disadvantaged members of society," Ms Samali said.

"I would also like to contribute to the emerging discourse on global governance," she said.

Last summer, Ms Samali served as a legal intern in the Criminal Law Division of the Northern Australian Aboriginal Legal Service in Darwin.

She is president of the Sydney University Law Society and associate editor of the *Sydney Globalist*, an undergraduate international affairs journal.

Ms Samali is a member of the Baulkham Hills Bahá'í community.



*May Samali, with the University Medal, at her graduation ceremony*



# Principles guide service in disaster zones

When devastating bushfires swept Victoria earlier this year, Red Cross worker Vahideh Hosseini headed to the heart of the disaster area to train counsellors and social workers attending to the needs of thousands of victims.

A few months later, Dr Hosseini was in the midst of another natural disaster, but this time it was the floods of northern New South Wales, the area she serves as Red Cross regional manager for northern NSW.

Her own Red Cross Office in Lismore became one of 16 evacuation centres set up to provide shelter and support to those displaced by the floods in May 2009.

Natural disasters are not a new experience for Dr Hosseini, who also helped victims of the 2008 flood in the Queensland city of Mackay, and coordinated a team to support and care for the residents of Innisfail when the town was devastated by tropical cyclone Larry in 2006.

But she described the Victorian bushfires as the most overwhelming and horrific situation she has experienced.

## Awards

Dr Hosseini's contribution has been such that she has received awards for her expertise in helping victims of natural disasters.

Service to humanity underpins her personal life as it does her professional activities.

As a member of the Bahá'í Faith she sees her own beliefs as aligned with the seven principles of the Red Cross: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.

"Yet it was my belief in these principles that made me homeless," she said, referring to her experiences in Iran, the land of her birth.

Persecuted at school for being a Bahá'í, she was sent by her parents to a boarding school in India in 1970.

In 1979 the revolution in Iran took place and 15 members of her extended family were killed because they were Bahá'ís.

She could not renew her passport. Her only option was to seek refugee status but she had to be patient for that to be arranged.

She continued studying in India and obtained her Bachelor and Masters degrees and then a PhD in economics.

The International Committee of the Red Cross arranged the support and travel documents that enabled her to come to Australia as a refugee in 1987.

After she arrived she volunteered her services to the Refugee Council of Australia, and then obtained work with the Department of Immigration.

Eventually she joined the Red Cross and served as manager for the Greater Western Sydney region for six years before her appointment to Lismore.

Dr Hosseini sees her work as an opportunity to give back to the organisation that assisted her many years ago.

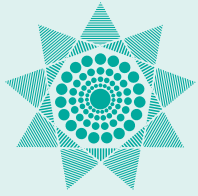
Although much of her work involves organising and training people for crises, she also manages Red Cross services in a wide variety of other fields, including aged care services, assistance to people of different cultural and literacy backgrounds, youth programs, and childcare.

Dr Hosseini was named "outstanding employee" in the Lismore 2002 Business Awards. In 2005, the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia gave her an award for 25 years of service to the community.

Dr Hosseini is currently a member of the Bahá'í Council for New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.

*Vahideh Hosseini (left) during the Mackay floods with Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin and Raymond Sambo from the Queensland Department of Communities*





*The Australian Bahá'í Report is a newsletter published in February, June and October by the Australian Bahá'í community.*

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# Call for law to protect freedom of religion

The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing, to practise them and to change them is central to human development and should be enshrined in Australian law, the Australian Bahá'í Community told a national inquiry.

The Community said laws relating to freedom of religion and belief should address at least three issues: the right to freedom of religion and belief as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the prohibition of discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief, and the prohibition of incitement to religious hatred or violence.

The Australian Bahá'í Community presented its views in a submission to the Australian Human Rights Commission's 2009 inquiry into freedom of religion and belief in the 21st century.

The Community said that legislation protecting the freedom of religion and belief should be accompanied by educational efforts to equip children and adults with skills and opportunities to learn about other systems of belief.

The Community singled out religious leaders as bearers of a great responsibility to prevent defamatory practices and to combat speech and acts based on religious hatred.

It called on religious leaders to "forcefully

sanction and unreservedly condemn" incitement to violence, extremism, or hatred in the name of religion.

"The leaders of our religious communities bear tremendous responsibility for guiding their followers towards a peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding with those who think and believe differently," the Community said.

"Religious leaders should actively encourage their followers in the pursuit of knowledge and peaceful dialogue, as this is the best counter to fanaticism".

The Community acknowledged the many religious leaders from all faiths who were already participating in interfaith initiatives and the building of interfaith understanding in Australia.

But it called for the interfaith circle to be "broadened and deepened".

Greater government support for interfaith initiatives at the local, state and national levels would be "a pro-active strategy for reducing the appeal of religious extremism," the Community said.

The full submission can be downloaded from the "Social Action" section of the Australian Bahá'í Web site at [www.bahai.org.au](http://www.bahai.org.au)

## INTERNATIONAL NEWS

### Egypt restores rights

Egypt has restored citizenship rights to Bahá'ís and other religious minorities.

The country's Ministry of Interior has published a decree that allows individuals to obtain government documents without identifying themselves as belonging to a particular religion.

The decree is the result of a recent Egyptian Supreme Administrative Court ruling in a case involving Bahá'ís. The ruling said that on government ID cards and other documents, individuals may put a dash in the field denoting religious affiliation.

Hossam Bahgat, director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, said the ruling was "a major victory for all Egyptians fighting for a state where all citizens enjoy equal rights regardless of their religion or belief".

The computerisation of ID cards, introduced by the government nearly five years ago, had locked out all religious classifications except Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Without ID cards, Egyptian Bahá'ís were unable to get documents essential to day-to-day life. This meant they were essentially blocked from obtaining education, financial services, and even health care in government hospitals.

There have been Bahá'ís in Egypt since the 19th century, and the Egyptian Bahá'í community is one of the oldest in the Middle East.

"We are very pleased that the Egyptian government has moved to officially change the regulation that prevented Bahá'ís and others from realising their rights of citizenship," said Bani Dugal, the principal representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations.