



Australian Bahá'í Community

Australia's Relations with the United Nations

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence And Trade Inquiry into Australia's Relations with the United Nations in the Post Cold War Environment

The functioning of the United Nations and its relationship with its component member states carries significant implications for the long term well-being and prosperity of Australia and the world. Undoubtedly the United Nations has already played a profound part in construction of a more peaceful and unified world. Nonetheless the objectives for which the United Nations was established remain unfulfilled in many respects.

Australia can make a notable contribution to a world which better realises these objectives by a vigorous and measured advocacy of those reforms which are necessary to enable the UN to deliver on "the peoples" aspirations for a world which is at once more peaceful, more cooperative, more united and which ensures the protection of the basic rights and freedoms of every human being.

Gradual institutional reform has of course characterized Australia's own development from its origins as separate colonies to an independent and modern Federal democracy. In 1912, the then head of the Bahá'í community, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, undertook an extensive tour of North America. He was asked by a high ranking US government official how best he could serve the interests of his nation and people. The official was advised that he could best serve his country by striving, as a citizen of the world, for the eventual application of the principle of federalism underlying the government of his own country to the relationships between the nations and peoples of the world. It is advice which resonates with our own traditions as a nation which has exemplified evolving federalism and has shown how much benefit it can bring to a people. As we enter a new century and a new millennium it is an idea calling for renewed examination as a long term goal - while short-term reforms are advocated and achieved.

We are enclosing a paper entitled *Turning Point for All Nations* which was published by the Bahá'í International Community on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. *Turning Point for All Nations* makes proposals for improving the functioning of the UN General Assembly, the Security Council and its military arm, strengthening the International Court of Justice, promoting economic development, improving protection of human rights, advancing the status of women and promoting moral education. The paper addresses many of the issues raised by the Committee's Inquiry. We trust that the Committee will find this publication of use in its deliberations and we discuss below some specific areas of *Turning Point*, in relation to the terms of reference of the Committee.

The implications of increasing intervention in internal disputes for national sovereignty, as defined under Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations

After a century of experience there can now be no doubt that the world is moving towards ever-increasing interdependence and integration: this is true in fields as diverse as sport, economics and regional and international politics. This gradual development represents a fundamental transformation with which the world is seeking to come to terms.

“Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching ... World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving.”

It is in this context that we believe issues of national sovereignty are best considered. National sovereignty has in the twentieth century played a complex role. On the one hand it has delivered freedom and independence to peoples who were subjected to domination and exploitation. On the other it has contributed to disastrous conflicts between and within nations, denying individuals the basis of a peaceful life. It has been one of the principal hindrances to the development of an effective and just system of international governance. Like anything - carried beyond moderation - national sovereignty's beneficial effects are outweighed by its harmful aspects.

In respect of the United Nations, attachment to the concept of sovereignty has thus far prevented the General Assembly developing into an institution which truly reflects the will of the people - which is a true forum for the promulgation of law and which is truly representative of humanity at large. Australia, we believe, should advocate those values and methods at international level which have served Australian people so well at the national, state and local level. Like any form of governance, trust and legitimacy can only be built on the basis of a close relationship with the people whose interests the governance is designed to serve. The General Assembly and its voting structure, as well as reflecting the state system, must come to represent more accurately the people of the world. In addition its resolutions must gradually come to possess the force of law.

Achievement of peace and a standing army for the United Nations

The Committee also raises the issue of the suitability of a standing army for the UN.

Without a standing international force, whose loyalty to the UN and independence from national considerations can be assured, problems of disarmament (including nuclear proliferation) cannot be resolved. They present an ever-present risk to the welfare of the world and of Australians. Ad hoc arrangements, as most recently experienced in the case of East Timor, are beset by political and logistic complexities, which hinder the delivery of peace and security to people whose lives are threatened. The problems are far from theoretical, as the consequences for those individuals are the loss of life, freedom, family and property while these problems are resolved. The establishment of a standing army would to some extent reduce the harm that flows from delays in the deployment of UN forces which arise in the current context. The

establishment of core regional forces under UN auspices for rapid deployment may be an initial step in this direction.

The Bahá'í community supports Australia's participation in UN forces properly established according to United Nations processes, in response to international crises.

The capacity of the United Nations to protect human rights

Two principal problems face United Nations work for the protection of human rights: lack of enforcement and follow-up and an insufficient emphasis on responsibilities as the counterpart and guarantor of human rights. These issues both require attention.

Without sufficient resources the work of UN human rights mechanisms will continue to be hampered. We suggest that Australia continue to advocate for an increase in the resources allocated to human rights to reflect their importance to the mandate of the United Nations.

United Nations mechanisms for the protection of human rights are hindered both in perception and reality by the participation (often in positions of influence) by governments, which either have not committed themselves to core human rights treaties, or which are under scrutiny for gross human rights violations. Review of membership qualifications to prevent such situations would strengthen human rights machinery.

Women's issues continue to remain at the forefront of human rights violations - particularly in their scale and sometimes in their systematic character.

The funding shortfall

Funding of the United Nations has represented a serious problem. Vigorous approaches to improve the funding situation are required. Principles to be applied in resolving this issue should be: that there should be no assessments without representation; assessments should be graduated in the interests of fairness and justice; voluntary mechanisms should not be overlooked.

Reform of the United Nations and Australia's role

The Bahá'í community welcomes the global gathering of heads of states and governments as part of the United Nations Millennium General Assembly and Summit. This global consultation should however involve the average citizen in some way, as ultimately the individual is at the centre of the issue of international governance which the United Nations represents.

The Australian parliament is well placed to promote involvement of many individual Australians in this discussion - through the inquiry process which it has already undertaken - and also through ongoing interest in the work that the Australian government is undertaking in the lead up to and during the Summit and Millennium General Assembly. We believe that reform of the United Nations should be an issue on which the views of constituents are sought.

Accompanying the Millennium Summit is the work of the Millennium Forum - which is undertaking a global consultation of civil society - with the aim of contributing the views of civil society to the Millennium Summit. The conclusions of the Millennium Forum - to meet from 22-26 May 2000 - should be considered in the development of Australia's position for the Millennium Summit.

The specific UN reforms advocated by *Turning Point* include:

The General Assembly

- Ensuring the General Assembly becomes more representative of people and that its resolutions gradually come to have the force of law.
- Raising the minimum standard of membership to ensure that states which violate basic human rights face membership consequences.
- Appointing a Commission to deal with irredentist and boundary claims which continue to be a potent source of conflict in the world.
- Searching for new financial arrangements which can guarantee the funding of the United Nations.
- Reducing the current six official languages of the United Nations to one international auxiliary language, adopted after study by an expert Commission.
- Investigating the possibility of a single international currency.

The Security Council

- Limiting the exercise of the veto power to its original purpose with the aim of its gradual elimination and the gradual elimination of permanent membership.
- Institutionalising current ad hoc military arrangements to create a standing international force.

The International Court of Justice

- Extending the right to bring a case before the International Court of Justice to the agencies of the United Nations.
- Ensuring the Court is the umbrella for new thematic courts and other tribunals.

Conclusion

Australia has long recognised the benefits that accrue from a strong and effective United Nations - particularly to the long-term security of Australia and its peoples. Australia's historical and geographic circumstances combine to give Australia a distinctive perspective on issues of international governance as well as a relative freedom from the concerns or threats that enmesh many other countries of the world. From this place Australia has the potential to make a disproportionate contribution to

the welfare of the world and thus to that of its own people. It can best do so by contributing to greater unity among and between nations, through reform of the United Nations to increase its effectiveness, and ultimately so that the principle of federalism can be given expression in the international affairs of the world.

“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.” - Bahá’u’lláh (1817-1892)