



Australian Bahá'í Community

SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENCES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE PROGRESS TOWARDS NATIONAL RECONCILIATION - SUBMISSION

Introduction

The Australian Bahá'í Community warmly welcomes the Inquiry into the Progress towards National Reconciliation by the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee.

Despite notable achievements, progress towards national reconciliation has been slow and marked with setbacks. The recent resurgence of divisive racial attitudes in Australia, the increased number of racial incidents, and the unrelieved deprivation faced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians make the need for solutions ever more pressing.

Healing the wounds and building a society in which people of diverse backgrounds live as members of one family are the most urgent issues confronting Australia today. Our nation's peace and prosperity and our standing in the international community depend to a great extent on their resolution.

The Centrality of Spiritual Issues

The central issues in the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians are essentially spiritual in character. The promotion of basic spiritual values and attitudes is required to bring about change in this relationship. Such a shift in consciousness will lead to:

- *the realisation that unity among Australia's peoples is the basis of progress for our society;*
- *the determination to pursue issues of justice between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians;*
- *the development of a desire for mutual understanding between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians; and*
- *an acceptance of the need for all parties to make adjustments necessary for the resolution of shared problems.*

The Oneness of Humanity – A Basis for Sustaining Reconciliation

Reconciliation: Australia's Challenge stated, “Despite major advances, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders often still face prejudice when trying to rent a home, find a job, hire a taxi, get service in shops and banks, and when doing the simple everyday things that most Australians take for granted. Public awareness and education about such issues remains a key task of reconciliation. Continuing acute disadvantage, discrimination and racism suffered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remains the biggest challenge for reconciliation (p.101)”.

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. It is not enough to offer academic education and jobs to people while at the same time shutting them out because of racial prejudice from normal social intercourse based on mutual respect.

As indicated in a statement last year by the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, racism is a mental construct. Remedies to racial prejudice must accordingly address first and foremost those mental illusions that have for so many thousands of years given rise to false concepts of superiority and inferiority among human populations.

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

The oneness of humanity is an underlying principle that is central to the success of the reconciliation process. The reality is that there is only the one human race. We are a single people, inhabiting the planet Earth, one human family bound together in a common destiny, a single entity created from one same substance. “Regard ye not one another as strangers” urges Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, “Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch”.

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. No real change will come about without close association and friendship between us.

Education is not only the shortest route out of poverty; it is also the shortest route out of prejudice. A national program of education, emphasising the values of tolerance, brotherhood, appreciation for cultures other than one's own, and respect for differences would be a most important step toward the elimination of racism.

Reconciliation should not be merely a one-way process of assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into the dominant life style on a so-called 'equal basis'. Rather non-indigenous Australians have to recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have much to offer to humanity through their spiritual

perspective, understanding and view of life. The sense of superiority inherent in the non-indigenous Australian culture of materialism lies at the heart of the unhappy relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians. Only with the mutual respect engendered by spiritual values of human nobility and compassion can relationships be healed. Only through such values can injustice and disrespect, prejudice and discrimination, and denial and neglect be eliminated.

Our vision of a reconciled nation goes far beyond the limits of mere association or appreciation of cultural difference, important though these are. We envision the building of a society whose closely-knit fabric shall be based on active cooperation, reciprocity, shared spiritual and moral values, and genuine concern for others. This society would move past a mere passive co-existence and would promote human dignity, stimulate the release of human potential, and actively cultivate the inherent nobility which makes up the basis of human nature.

The task is immensely difficult. It is natural that the lack of progress, in many respects, should lead to disappointment and frustration. But the reaction to these difficulties must not be by seeking new rationalisations for entrenching racial separation. It is only at the most profound level of our shared humanity that we will find solutions.

Justice and the Recognition of Rights

The fundamental solution that will bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into full partnership in the construction of a progressive society rests ultimately on the acceptance and application of the principle of justice.

As noted in *Overcoming Disadvantage*, “In a just society, it is unacceptable if one part of the society experiences disadvantage” (p. 2). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia vividly illustrate the consequences of the lack of justice and moderation inherent in existing economic practices and patterns, and it remains the case that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, on virtually every index, are the most underprivileged group in Australian society. Prejudice and discrimination have created a disparity in standards of living, providing some Australians with excessive economic advantage while denying others the bare necessities for leading healthy and dignified lives.

Achieving Economic Independence identifies six areas where action is needed to improve the economic independence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (p. 5). *Overcoming Disadvantage* identifies five critical areas where actions are necessary to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. Addressing these areas will be to the benefit of the entire community, for society benefits most if all its members are healthy, well educated, and contributing to the wealth and productivity of all.

Particular attention must be paid to the individual right to gainful employment. Viewing unemployment as an unavoidable feature of an economic system amounts to an unacceptable admission of human impotence. Employment is a God-given right and responsibility. In Bahá’u’lláh’s words, “It is enjoined upon every one of you to

engage in some form of occupation ... We have graciously exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of worship unto God.”

Bahá'u'lláh also identifies economic security as a God-given responsibility of any society: “Know ye that the poor are the trust of God in your midst ... Ye will most certainly be called upon to answer for His trust.” Social and economic resources must be redirected to ensure that no one is deprived of either employment opportunities or basic living needs.

If any discrimination is to be tolerated, it should be discrimination in favour of, not against, the disadvantaged minority. This is a Bahá'í principle that the community's administrative practice tries to uphold. Without affirmative action, social change will be too slow and the privileges of the dominant majority will continue to eclipse the rights of those from minority or oppressed sectors of society. Programs of affirmative action are temporary measures to balance the ills that contemporary society and a history of injustice have produced.

Justice demands the recognition of human rights. *Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights* noted, “the entitlements and freedoms of all people are recognised in human rights instruments, many of which have been freely signed and ratified by Australia, and in some instances are now part of Australian Law. However, it is an unavoidable reality of our past that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not had the opportunity to fully enjoy their human rights” (p. 2). Issues surrounding the native title and its application, Aboriginal deaths in custody, the high rate of incarceration of Aboriginal people in prisons, the separation of Aboriginal children from their families, health, education and dispossession are all essentially human rights issues that must be addressed for reconciliation to progress. As *Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights* stated, “The full exercise and enjoyment of the human rights of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is an essential foundation for reconciliation” (p. 2).

Formal processes of human rights education within Australia will enhance progress towards the recognition of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 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 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.

The *Plan of Action* prepared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for the UN Decade for Human Rights Education 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 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.”

Successful human rights education must seek to transform individual attitudes and behaviour and thereby establish, within every local and national community, a new culture of respect for human rights. Only 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.

The Equality of Men and Women

Greater prominence in the reconciliation process needs to be given to the principle of the equality of men and women.

Racism creates basic social divisions and power structures, and the inequality promoted by racial divisions is reinforced by structures that also limit opportunities for women. As a result of the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women often live in virtual invisibility. Neglect of their experience and media reinforcement of gender stereotypes exacerbate the problem.

If we continue to neglect or marginalise the principle of full and absolute equality of women and men, mothers and children will continue to suffer disproportionately. The inattention of fathers and of a patriarchal society, and the lack of support for the best possible conditions for mothers, children, and the family, have contributed to social disintegration.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are most glaringly affected by social structures that sustain discrimination and exploitation, but these injustices affect everyone. For example, disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women oppressed because of race produce unacknowledged benefits for women and men belonging to favoured groups. The reluctance to acknowledge these privileges perpetuates injustice and hinders our society from developing in healthy ways.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are welcomed as full partners with men in all fields of endeavour, conditions that promote real justice and reconciliation will prevail. Such issues as the provision of social, economic, and political measures to enhance the lives of children and the family, and measures for safer, less violent communities, will become more central. Not only will society become healthier, but our economic and political life will improve once women gain their rightful place alongside men.

Mutual Understanding and the Role of the Individual

The achievement of reconciliation requires an effort and contribution from all of us. No one individual or group can be considered solely responsible for healing the problems that we face. Nor can any section of the community be regarded as having yet fulfilled its obligations to realise the hopes inherent in reconciliation.

Reconciliation: Australia's Challenge observed, "Reconciliation has begun to enter the hearts and minds of the Australian people creating one of the most determined and vibrant people's movements ever seen in the history of the nation. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians are increasingly working together to recognise and help heal the wounds of the past and move on together" (p. 61).

Sustaining the Reconciliation Process identified key actions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians need to take at the individual level for progress to continue (p. 13). *Achieving Economic Independence* listed barriers experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities and noted, "the responsibility to address these barriers should be shared between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians...progress will only occur when all elements of the Australian community recognise their individual responsibilities and work in partnership" (p. 3).

Social change begins with the individual. Sweeping social changes may be proposed or worked for, but no plan will have a lasting effect unless it is built upon an inner revolution, a dramatic change in the attitudes of the individual.

Non-indigenous Australians must address and root out unexamined prejudices and the sometimes unconscious sense of superiority in their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Correspondingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must reciprocate with a readiness to put aside the past and to remove the suspicion that must naturally arise in dealings with a society which has visited so much injustice upon them.

Progress towards national reconciliation will be greater when there is a greatly increased appeal to the individual Australian. The transformation of a whole nation ultimately depends on the initiative and change of character of the individuals who compose it. The reconciliation process will be most effective when it enables 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.

Conclusion

The Australian Bahá'í Community believes that renewed and refocussed efforts toward the national reconciliation are vital to achieving justice and harmony between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australians.

The *Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation* expresses hope for "a united Australia that respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all."

This hope will be fully realised when the people of Australia come together in a harmonious and creative relationship based on the spiritual principles of the oneness of humanity, justice, the recognition of human rights, the equality of men and women, and the primary role of the individual.

Australian Bahá'í Community
November 2002

APPENDIX: THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY AND RECONCILIATION

The indigenous peoples of the world hold a special place in the eyes of the Bahá'í Community, which believes that the suffering of human beings during the twentieth century has nowhere been more acutely felt than in the lives, families, and communities of the world's aboriginal or indigenous peoples. Bahá'ís firmly believe that, in the course of time and in conditions of prosperity and well-being, the indigenous peoples of our planet will make even greater contributions to the happiness, the progress, and the spiritual illumination of the entire human family than they have already made through their suffering and sacrifice.

The Bahá'í Community is committed to working towards the creation of justice and unity, healing and well being. From its inception in 1863, the Bahá'í Community was dedicated to the principle of the unity of humankind and has accumulated more than a century of experience in creating models of unity that transcend race, culture, nationality, class, and the differences of sex and religion.

The Bahá'í Community recognises that a great deal of work must be done to right wrongs, to create justice, and to educate a new generation and that instant solutions are not possible. Despite the inevitable obstacles encountered by Bahá'ís in the ongoing process of eradicating racism from their communities, however, their experience has been a positive and unifying one.

The Bahá'í Community has a long-standing commitment to the reconciliation process in Australia. Since the 1950s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have been part of the Bahá'í Community, participating in its development and national administration and representing the Bahá'í Community at national and international events. Today 3.2 per cent of the members of the Bahá'í Community in Australia are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. The Tjukurpa Advisory Group, a national body consisting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Bahá'ís, has been appointed to provide advice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia, the governing body of the Australian Bahá'í Community.

The Bahá'í Community is proud to have been one of the first faith groups represented on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's Advisory Group of Faith Communities. The Bahá'í Community participated in the first Week of Prayer for Reconciliation celebrated in the Great Hall of Parliament House by 400 religious leaders from a variety of backgrounds. Since then, the Bahá'í Community has observed National Reconciliation Week each year, as well as involving itself in other reconciliation activities at national and local levels. The Bahá'í Community has continued to play an active role in the Advisory Group on Faith Communities for Reconciliation.