



## Australian Bahá'í Community

### Separation of Children

*Submission to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children, 1996*

The Australian Bahá'í community wishes to express its profound sympathy to indigenous people for the deep spiritual wounds inflicted upon their families by the past practice of separating children from their parents. We welcome and fully support the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.

We wish to take this opportunity to offer our assistance, as a community comprising both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, in furthering, at a local level, the process the Inquiry is addressing nationally. We are happy to approach indigenous members of our community and to assist those who wish to do so to record their personal histories for the Inquiry. Alternatively, if you consider appropriate, we are prepared, in selected localities, to attempt the task of bringing together local representatives of indigenous and non-indigenous communities to foster reconciliation in the context of sharing of the experiences of separation that the Inquiry is addressing.

The Bahá'í community will endeavour to play its part in the important task of achieving healing and reconciliation between Australians, in part, by promoting the fundamental unity of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians as equal members of one human family as well as by recognising and valuing the needs and rights of all indigenous families and communities.

In our 1995 submission to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, our community affirmed the belief that in order for reconciliation to be successful a fundamental shift in attitudes and behaviour on the part of all those involved in the process is required which recognises the essential spiritual kinship or oneness of all human beings.

Many in indigenous society feel very strongly about the effects of child separation policies on themselves and others in indigenous communities. Hearing the voices of indigenous Australians on this issue is important to resolving it as a barrier to reconciliation. In this context, the Inquiry has the potential to play a significant role in portraying a more balanced, and therefore more accurate history of indigenous and non-indigenous relationships; healing indigenous families and communities who have been separated by government policies and practices; creating greater understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous people; and ensuring that the mistakes of the past are not repeated by society in future.

In addressing the problems of past policies the key seems to us to resolve the continuing effects of these policies in the present; and to provide a basis for healing

and the fostering of more productive relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in the future.

A key issue is ensuring that those indigenous Australians who are still separated from their families and are trying to locate information which will help them find their relatives are assisted in this task. Reviewing laws and practices in the government and non-government sectors relating to the handling and release of such information is thus an area that we believe should be addressed by the Inquiry.

The sharing of stories of personal separation, in the context of the Inquiry, is a significant step by society in the healing process within Aboriginal families and also between indigenous and non-indigenous communities. We believe that the fruit of this work should be made available to society by integrating some of the stories and materials before the Inquiry into school curriculums on Australian history in order to present a more accurate history and to build greater empathy and understanding for indigenous people amongst the present and future generations.

Furthermore, a review of existing laws and practices needs to be undertaken to ensure that the rights of children and their parents are paramount. The emphasis placed on the protection of the family in article 16 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is no less relevant today than it was then. Indeed the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child has re-emphasised the importance of the family unit in the context of child welfare. The Bahá'í community places the highest importance on the role of the family. In addition, the family, of course, plays an especially fundamental role in indigenous society. Policies and practices should strengthen, support and protect the family unit as the optimum physical, social and spiritual environment for the well-being of children.

Other issues which concern those affected by these past policies should also be considered in order that the Inquiry can contribute to the process of healing.

As critical as we believe the work of the Inquiry to be, in the end, the past cannot be changed. If healing is to occur, the Inquiry must not only address the issues before it, it must lay the groundwork for this sad episode in our history to be resolved as part of the process of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. We urge the Inquiry to seek such an outcome. The problems of the present, such as high rates of imprisonment, inadequate housing, health services, and education need to be given priority lest they too become problems of the past bedevilling our future.

We trust that the National Inquiry will contribute to building a just future for all Australians which recognises, values and respects the role that both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians have to play in that common future.