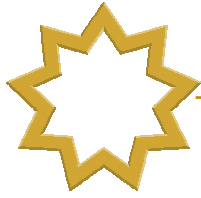


INQUIRY INTO OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE

Organisation: Baha'i Community of NSW and ACT

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Date received: 30/01/2008



Bahá'í Council

for New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory

28th January, 2008

Standing Committee on Social Issues
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (Inquiry)

On behalf of the Bahá'í Community of NSW and ACT, we are grateful for the opportunity to provide comment on the inquiry into the well-being and welfare of the Indigenous community by the Standing Committee on Social Issues.

We wish to congratulate the NSW Government on its commitment to pursue an agenda of social development, equality of access to services and benefits and the promotion of the welfare of all citizens in New South Wales. In doing so, the NSW Government plays an active role in combating intolerance and building a society that promotes respect for all.

We believe that indigenous disadvantage presents a significant barrier to social progress and to the building of peaceful and harmonious communities. In the collective experience of our community, initiatives in this area have proven to be of fundamental importance to the well-being and prosperity of our State.

Extending beyond the primary focus of the Inquiry, we would like to share our learning of the universal principles that the Bahá'í community has applied which have been underlying to our social and economic development work with the Indigenous community worldwide. Our experience can provide implications for legislation and planning regimes that can be effectively coordinated on a state-wide basis.

The Bahá'í Council would be happy to respond to any of the elements of its submission, should the Committee wish to pursue them.

We understand that all submissions are property of the Committee and request permission to make this open submission to the Committee available to the Bahá'í Community of NSW and ACT.

Yours sincerely,

Judith Navidi
Secretary
The Bahá'í Council for NSW and the ACT

NSW Legislative Council
Standing Committee on Social Issues

Inquiry into Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage

A submission by the
Baha'is of NSW and ACT

January 2008

**NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO CLOSING THE GAP AND OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS
DISADVANTAGE – SUBMISSION**

The Bahá'í Council for NSW and ACT warmly welcomes the Inquiry into Closing the Gap and Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage by the NSW Legislative Council Social Issues Committee. There are several Bahá'í communities that are predominantly indigenous located in the central and far west of NSW. The indigenous people 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 indigenous people.

The Bahá'í Faith is a worldwide religion with more than six million members from all parts of the globe. The Bahá'í community is committed to working towards the creation of justice, healing and well-being in Australia and is striving to build a community that demonstrates practical solutions for the challenges of modern society. Drawing from more than a century of experience in creating models of unity that transcend allegiances, around Australia, local Bahá'í communities have conducted systematic projects in socio-economic development work in indigenous communities providing assistance to the youth and homeless people's services and supporting development agencies. Despite the inevitable obstacles encountered by the Baha'is in this ongoing process of empowering and eradicating injustice in their communities, however, their work has been positive as it has been allowed to flourish in an environment where there is an underlying source of unity and social cohesion. Otherwise, marking differences can become a basis for new forms of separation or superiority (See Appendix 1).

The lifetime expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is but a symptom of a greater, multi-dimensional problem. The Bahá'í Community recognises that a great deal of work must be carried out to right wrongs, to create justice, and to educate a new generation. Instant solutions are not possible. Education, however, provides a long-term solution to indigenous disadvantage, by creating a shift in consciousness within the next generation of Australians, both indigenous and non-indigenous.

Centrality of the Spirit

It is significant that when indigenous cultures approach the discussion of social problems, leaders and members of the community refer frequently to the Creator and to the human spirit. The existence in many Aboriginal communities of strong systems of spiritual and religious belief and practice represent important resources for social development. Yet the prevailing social, economic, and political practices of our country are often driven by an excessive and socially corrosive materialism that has, in turn, driven approaches to governance and economic and social development. Failure to appreciate the implications of the gap between these two approaches to social reality explains much of the injustice experienced by indigenous Australians.

Ingenuity and free inquiry, industrial productivity and material success have made many positive contributions to human civilization. There is, however, no greater barrier to progress in achieving social justice and the well-being of indigenous Australians than an ideology of materialism that lacks consistent and viable moral principles. Bahá'ís are convinced that to

effect genuine transformations in attitudes and to devise enduring solutions, it is necessary to adopt a fundamentally different orientation and approach.

It is a foundational principle of the Bahá'í Faith that humanity is a single people, created of the same substance, and sharing the Earth as our common home. Programs designed to address indigenous injustice will not succeed unless they are forged with the positive understanding of the spiritual kinship between all human beings. 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 disadvantage, prejudice and discrimination, denial and neglect be eliminated.

Justice and the Recognition of Rights

It will not be possible to close the lifetime expectancy gap and bring indigenous Australians into full partnership in the construction of a progressive society without the acceptance and application of the principle of justice.

As noted in the Australian Government Productivity Commission report, *Overcoming Disadvantage* (2003), “in a just society, it is unacceptable if one part of the society experiences disadvantage.” Many indigenous communities in Australia vividly illustrate the consequences of the lack of justice inherent in existing social and economic practices, and it remains the case that indigenous people, 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 social and economic advantage while denying others the bare necessities for leading healthy and dignified lives. Despite formal equality, institutionalised inequality and prejudicial attitudes persist.

Overcoming Disadvantage (2003) identifies five critical areas where actions are necessary to address indigenous 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 wellbeing of all.

Particular attention must be paid to the individual right to gain employment. Working and making a contribution to society is fundamental to self-esteem. Social and economic resources must be redirected to ensure that no one is deprived of either employment opportunities or basic living needs. Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í Faith, identifies the provision of 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.”

If any discrimination is to be tolerated, it should be a discrimination not against, but in favour of the disadvantaged minority. This is a Bahá'í principle that our community's administrative practice strives 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. It is an unavoidable reality of our past that indigenous people have not had the opportunity to fully enjoy their human rights. Issues surrounding 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 essential human rights issues that must be addressed before the lifetime expectancy gap can be closed.

Formal processes of human rights education within Australia will enhance progress towards the recognition of the rights of indigenous people. It is essential to touch the hearts, and elevate the behaviour, of all Australians, if human rights are to be transformed from the expression of abstract norms to the reality experienced by people in their daily lives. Successful human rights education must seek to transform individual attitudes and behaviour and thereby establish a new culture of respect for human rights. Only change in the fundamental outlook of every individual, whether a government official or ordinary citizen, can bring about the universal observance of human rights principles in the daily lives of people.

Reconciliation and the Need for Healing

Continued support for the reconciliation process is vital to achieving justice and harmony between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Aboriginal leaders and spokespersons repeat frequently the crucial importance of addressing the healing of families and communities with resources dedicated to this stage in the overall process of Aboriginal development. Without such healing, other developmental processes of governance, economic development, and education will not succeed. The importance of legal and political evolution to redress inadequacies and injustice of past laws is also essential.

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

Self-Determination and Consultation

Another important step towards overcoming indigenous disadvantage is encouraging indigenous participation in public affairs and granting indigenous communities the right to determine their own future. That all members of the community should have a say in how they are governed is a principle that today very few would deny, and the most effective level at which such widespread participation can be realized is local, not national.

The actual process of making community decisions at the local level and of organizing and developing a community is vitally important. The Bahá'í community recognises the importance of actively involving the indigenous community in the various processes of formulating state government policies related to overcoming indigenous disadvantage. In our own community, we have found the Bahá'í consultative process to be useful for such deliberations, and we are happy to offer it as a possible model.

The consultative process guides the manner in which community-wide discussion is pursued and the way in which decision-making bodies resolve disputes and plan strategies of

community development. Among the principles that guide Bahá'í consultation are the following:

- The prohibition of factionalism or partisanship;
- The encouragement of all to speak freely according to their own consciences;
- The responsibility for all participating to exercise courtesy and moderation in the expression of their views;
- The obligation to be detached from one's own contribution so that the group or collective itself can come to own that contribution;
- The primacy of the interests of the group or community over individual interests;
- The requirement that, once a decision is taken, both the majority favouring it and those originally opposed respect, support and carry out the decision in unity. Such unanimous and community-wide support ensures decisions are not subverted and sabotaged. Only through such support can a decision be properly evaluated and changed if genuine deficiencies in the decision itself are detected;
- The obligation of all decision-making bodies to evaluate continually their work and pursue ongoing consultation with the wider community to assess and, if necessary, revise their decisions.

Bahá'ís are convinced that governance and the administration of human affairs should be carried on through the principle of consultation in which all peoples have a say in how decisions affect them.

Education is the Solution

The Bahá'í Community believes that education must be the foundation of any policy designed to address the lifetime expectancy gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Education is not only the shortest route out of poverty and disadvantage, but it is also the shortest route out of prejudice. Greater investment in education is needed, both in Aboriginal communities and in the schools attended by children and young people from all other segments of society.

We recommend that the principle of “unity in diversity” serve as a core concept in school curricula and educational programs. It is necessary to build curricula and programs with an emphasis on positive goals, such as unity and integration, inclusion, health, and development. Of fundamental importance is an integrated educational approach that seeks out relationships between people, subject areas, and different sectors of life, and that instills a value of service to the broader good of society as the point around which young people develop their identities.

A statewide program of education, emphasising the values of tolerance, appreciation for cultures other than one's own, and respect for differences would be a most important step towards the elimination of racism and disadvantage.

Here in New South Wales, the Bahá'í community has gained considerable experience in implementing a number of education programs along these lines, which we would be pleased to offer for consideration.

Bahá'í Junior Youth Programs are now held in many localities around the state. Designed for 12 to 15 year olds, this program incorporates a literacy component as an element of a larger process of youth empowerment that addresses community service, moral education, and a vision of contributing to the advancement of society. It is intended not only for Bahá'ís but for youth in general, whose engagement with the program will enable them to contribute more effectively to the progress of their communities, their nations, and the world.

The Bahá'í-inspired Education for Peace Institute of Australia, a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation dedicated to building a culture of peace, offers programs to Bahá'ís and the wider community that are targeted at all age groups including children, junior youth, youth and adults. It aims to provide a supportive learning environment for the participants to acquire knowledge and skills to be peace-makers within their home and community.

Bahá'í Education classes are provided to children in more than 180 public schools. In these classes students are encouraged to explore ways in which they can contribute to society and serve humanity. In doing so, the classes aim to contribute to the awakening and development of the spiritual nature of all children complementing the intellectual, physical and social education provided in schools.

The Bahá'í approach to education takes as its starting point the belief that every person is a spiritual being with limitless potential for noble action. In order to be made manifest, that potential must be consciously cultivated through a curriculum attuned to this fundamental human dimension. Hence Bahá'í educational programs focus on the development of moral capabilities including the ability to:

- participate effectively in non-adversarial collective decision-making;
- act with rectitude of conduct based on ethical and moral principles;
- take initiative in a creative, disciplined form;
- commit to empowering educational activities;
- create a vision of a desired future based on shared values and principles, and to inspire others to work for its fulfillment;
- understand relationships based on dominance and to contribute towards their transformation into relationships based on reciprocity and service.

In this way, the curriculum seeks to develop the individual as a whole, integrating the spiritual and the material, the theoretical and the practical, and the sense of individual progress with service to the community.

Conclusion

We believe that any endeavour to close the lifetime expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians must recognise the centrality of the spirit and adhere to principles of justice and human rights, reconciliation and the need for healing, self-determination and consultation. Education, in its different forms, provides a long-lasting solution to the cycle of indigenous poverty and disadvantage.

The Australian Bahá'í Community firmly believes that, in the course of time and in conditions of prosperity and well-being, the indigenous peoples of our planet have a unique contribution to make to the happiness, the progress, and the spiritual illumination of the entire human family.

Bahá'í Council for NSW and ACT
January 2008

Appendix: An Introduction to the Bahá'í Community of New South Wales and The Australian Capital Territory

- ✻ ***In Australia for 85 years:*** The Australian Baha'i community was founded in 1920 by the arrival in Sydney of Clara and Hyde Dunn. The New South Wales and ACT communities have grown to comprise around 5,000 members, reflecting the diversity of modern Australia and living in over 150 localities around the country. The national centre is located adjacent to the Baha'i House of Worship, near Mona Vale, Sydney. The Sydney Bahá'í Centre in Silverwater was officially opened by her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir AC, Governor of New South Wales in October 2003.

- ✻ ***An independent world religion:*** The Baha'i Faith is an independent world religion which originated in Iran (then Persia) in the mid-nineteenth century. There are now more than six million Baha'is from diverse ethnic and cultural background. While the Baha'i Faith is an independent religion in its own right, Baha'is recognise and honour the divine origin of all major religions.

- ✻ ***Central tenets:*** Belief in the oneness of humanity is the pivot round which revolve all the teaching of the Bahá'í Faith recognised as the ultimate goal of human experience. It follows that a concern for the human rights of all people is integral to the Bahá'í community identifying the equality of the sexes as a fundamental principle of the Bahá'í Faith. The Baha'i Writings emphasise the value of education as the key to material and spiritual progress. At the personal level, the importance of daily prayer, independent investigation of the truth and rectitude of conduct are essential elements in the foundation of peace and well-being. Baha'is are obliged to avoid involvement in partisan politics and to be loyal to their government.

- ✻ ***Baha'is work for peace:*** In Australia, the Baha'i community has worked actively in the fields of human rights, reconciliation, advancement of women, peace, moral education, anti-racism and the inter-faith movement.

- ✻ ***Indigenous involvement:*** The Bahá'í Community has a long-standing commitment to the socio-economic development process in Australia. Since the 1950's, 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 3.4 % 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 Baha'is, has been appointed to provide advice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is 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 continues to observe National Reconciliation Week each year holding local events and dedicating services at the Bahá'í House of Worship.

- ✻ ***Active internationally:*** At the international level, the Baha'i International Community represents the Baha'i Faith at the United Nations, where it holds consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and UNICEF. It is an active participant in United Nations forums and activities.

✻ ***On the web:*** For more information about the Baha'i Faith, please refer to www.bahai.org.au and www.bahai.org.