

**137th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union
St Petersburg, Russian Federation**

General Debate

**Contribution by Senator the Hon Ian Macdonald
Leader of the Australian Delegation**

Promoting cultural pluralism and peace through inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue

Madam President of the Assembly, President of the IPU, Mr Chowdhury, fellow parliamentarians.

On behalf of the Australian delegation, I thank the IPU Secretariat and the Russian Parliament for hosting the Assembly in this great city. And Australia thanks Mr Chowdhury for his wise and energetic leadership during his presidency.

I offer the apologies of the Speaker of the Australian Parliament, the Hon Tony Smith MP, who was unable to be here as our Parliament is sitting. In the absence of the Presiding Officer, I lead the Australian delegation as the longest serving current member of Parliament.

Opening remarks

Australia is a nation of people of many origins, backgrounds and religions.

In a population of over 23 million, one quarter of the population was born overseas and another one quarter has at least one parent born overseas. Australians trace their births back to around 200 different countries, speak more than 300 languages and follow more than 100 religions.

Per capita, Australia is one of the highest recipients of refugees from all over the world. Australians are proud of our multicultural society. We recognise that

cultural diversity is one of our greatest strengths and one that equips us to build a future where everyone belongs.

Australia is also home to one of the oldest continuous cultures on earth. Australian Indigenous peoples have been meeting over many thousands of years for ceremonies and to discuss matters of cultural importance. The Australian Parliament, too, since 1901, has followed suit and debates and listens.

These characteristics make us unique and they enrich our country.

We are also somewhat unique in that we have not experienced war on our soil or major insurrection in our country.

While we recognise that we can always do better, we have achieved much.

What parliamentarians can do

As parliamentarians there is much we can do to help build an inclusive and cohesive society.

Political leaders can influence community attitudes towards culturally and religiously diverse communities. Members of parliament can use the parliamentary forum to report to the nation on the many achievements of communities they represent.

In Australia, racism, vilification and any form of discrimination is illegal and those who incite racial hatred commit criminal offences.

The current Australian Parliament includes Indigenous voices in both houses; we have a Minister who is an Indigenous person and our parliamentarians currently include the first Muslim woman member and the first black African-born senator, who is a woman.

Many of our representatives have direct life experience of what it is to be a migrant or a child of migrants, to be marginalised and to experience prejudice and discrimination.

They also know the benefits of leaving behind fear and uncertainty for a country that values individual freedom and democratic institutions and where children

can grow up facing choice rather than barriers. So Australian Parliamentarians by actions, as well as words, promote cultural pluralism and peace.

I want my colleague Senator Chris Ketter to have time to address the Assembly so I will conclude and ask you to note that Senator Ketter will share more later on Australia's work promoting inter-ethnic and inter-faith dialogue.