

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

General Debate

Contribution by Senator Chris Ketter, Australia

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

Madam President, I join with my Australian colleagues Senator Macdonald and Mr Wilson in expressing our appreciation to our generous Russian hosts for their efforts in ensuring the success of the 137th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Australia's initiatives

In March this year, the Prime Minister launched Australia's new multicultural statement: *Multicultural Australia: united, strong, successful*. The statement reaffirms Australia's commitment to a culturally diverse, tolerant and harmonious society and outlines our shared values as Australians for respect, equality and freedom.

The multicultural statement is the product of consultation with peak bodies and community groups including inter-faith organisations.

Australia recognises that for ethnic community organisations to flourish, they need practical and financial support.

Inter-faith and inter-cultural communities are supported in their work to

- ensure the needs and aspirations of ethnic communities in public policy and programs are included
- address signs of racial, religious and cultural intolerance

- improve the social and economic participation of vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and
- improve intercultural understanding in schools and the community.

Throughout our world there is a rich tapestry of religious expression. Interestingly within the Christian tradition, the Russian Catholic Church (which exists in many countries), forms the 'meeting point' between the Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox. We would expect that each tradition is entitled to consistent treatment by the state.

While dialogue is vital for cultural and inter-faith respect, understanding and co-operation, a cohesive society also requires a robust policy, legislative and procedural framework.

Australia's Racial Discrimination Act and Criminal Code include provisions prohibiting offensive behaviour based on race or ethnic origin, urging violence or advocating terrorism or genocide.

The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights and other parliamentary scrutiny committees examine all bills and legislative instruments for compatibility with specific individual rights and liberties as well as compliance with international human rights treaties to which Australia is a party. The scrutiny committees report to parliament on their findings.

Indeed, one of the most effective means for protecting rights and engaging with diverse communities is through parliamentary committees. By contributing submissions and appearing at hearings, representatives from Australia's diverse communities can contribute to policy and legislation.

Closing remarks

While preventing extremism and violent ideologies might provide a compelling reason for inter-faith and inter-ethnic dialogue, peace and social cohesion are of course objectives for all times and all places.

Social cohesion is enhanced when the benefits of economic growth are widely distributed. Inclusive prosperity is one of the challenges we face as a nation.

Australia's ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has benefitted Australia in so many ways, contributing skills and ideas from which we have built a nation that is outward-looking, dynamic, and forging connections with the rest of the world.

By sharing a common political and institutional structure without prejudice or disadvantage we can continue a common, tolerant and prosperous future together.