

146th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

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General Debate

Contribution by the Hon Milton Dick MP, Speaker

Promoting peaceful coexistence and inclusive societies: Fighting intolerance

Mr President, fellow delegates,

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this fundamental issue on behalf of the Australian Parliament.

Australia is a vibrant, multicultural nation with a proud First Nations heritage dating back 65,000 years, making Australia the home to the world's oldest continuous culture. Today, almost one third of Australians were born overseas. Our rich cultural and linguistic diversity is central to our unique national identity and is one of our greatest strengths.

To be tolerant is to accept others whose actions, beliefs, physical capabilities, religion, customs, ethnicity or nationality differ from one's own.

The support for ethnic diversity and multiculturalism amongst Australians remains high and continues to grow. This support gives us a significant advantage in responding to the pressures placed on social cohesion including intolerance and exclusion, flamed by misinformation and disinformation.

In Australia we believe that everyone deserves a fair go. At its core, is the sense and belief that there is an expectation of equal opportunity regardless of a persons' background.

At an international level, Australia has had a long-held commitment to this ethos of equality of opportunity. Australia was a founding member of the United Nations and an original signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights upon its adoption by the UN in 1948.

Inclusivity should be promoted across a number of levels: through legislation, policy and within society amongst its people.

LEGISLATION TO PROMOTE EQUALITY

The Australian Parliament has legislation to advance and promote equality across the Australian community.

At the heart of equality, is the belief that all people should be treated fairly and should not be discriminated against.

Australia takes discrimination very seriously.

Australia has both federal and state level anti-discrimination laws. They cover age discrimination, disability discrimination, racial discrimination, and sex discrimination. Anti-discrimination measures are also embedded across other legislation.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT & MISINFORMATION

We know that social and economic inequalities, experiences of discrimination, and concerns about national and global issues are undeniably linked to social cohesion. These issues have been identified as a major threat to democratic and social institutions.

In Australia, trust in government and our democracy remains high. However, we know that trust in government is driven by the accountability, responsiveness and reliability of government institutions which are in turn fundamental for democracy and social cohesion. We also know that trust is closely tied to a citizen's satisfaction with democracy.

The rise of social media and online news means there is unlimited information available at people's fingertips. It can be hard for people to know who or what to believe. It can be hard to know where information has come from, who wrote it, or when it was produced. Some people are taking advantage of this trend and will deliberately disseminate false information.

Deliberate dissemination of false information is not new. Though, a key difference now is the role social media networks have in providing a platform and allowing people to target or reach specific audiences. Social media platforms can form 'echo chambers' that can lead to cementing hateful extremist attitudes. People can then become desensitised to hateful language.

COUNTERTERRORISM & EXTREMEIST BEHAVIOUR

There is some research that suggests that false information can shape hateful extremist beliefs and behaviours. This poses a direct challenge to a peaceful existence.

Violent extremism has no place in Australia.

In the last few years, ideologically motivated violent extremism – mostly nationalist and racist violent extremism made up about 50 per cent of the Australian Intelligence Organisation's domestic counter-terrorism caseload.

Australia's approach to countering violent extremism comprises of four key activities:

1. building strength in diversity and social participation
2. early intervention, disengagement and reintegration
3. targeted work with vulnerable communities and institutions, and
4. addressing terrorist propaganda online.

It is important that people who are online can identify extremist behaviours and misinformation to maintain social resilience.

PARLIAMENTARY FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

One of the important practical and constructive ways in which the Australian Parliament promotes cooperation and collaboration amongst people with differing views, is through Parliamentary Friendship Groups. These groups are as informal, non-partisan groups established by parliamentarians to raise awareness of, or increase liaison with, a particular group, organisation, or issue.

Parliamentary Friendship Groups are open to all parliamentarians and operate in an apolitical manner.

In the current parliament, there are over 100 groups whose focus ranges widely from specific matters such as health, transport safety and housing to cultural diversity.

These groups promote shared interests of people and encourage co-operation, even if their political beliefs may suggest otherwise.

DIVERSITY IN THE PARLIAMENT

The last topic I would like to touch on is diversity, in Australia and in the Australian Parliament.

At the previous Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly in Kigali, I spoke about how the current Australian Parliament is the most ethnically and culturally diverse in our history. The significance of this diversity, as a reflection of our nation, cannot be overstated.

A diverse parliament which better reflects our society also adds legitimacy to our democratic process. It enables parliament to provide greater scrutiny and make decisions which better represent the experiences, needs, views and the aspirations of the community that we serve. It encourages engagement and reduced likelihood of people turning to extremist alternatives.

All of the elements I have spoken about today – legislation to promote equality, trust in government and misinformation, platforms to promote shared interests and

diversity in Parliament – are what drives peaceful co-existence and an inclusive democracy in Australia.

When I was appointed as Speaker to the Australian House of Representatives in July last year, I made the point that the Parliament should be more inclusive and open to Australians of all walks of life as well as a workplace that is safe for all who enter.

Today, I remain determined as ever to ensure that the Australian Parliament upholds the highest standards of behaviour, based on respect, tolerance, equality, and inclusion, consistent with what is expected of us by the Australian public.

Thank you.