

## Tuesday, 1 February 2011 - Press Release from Australian NGO Coalition at Australia's Universal Periodic Review

### *Australia Commits to Give Full and Proper Consideration to 145 International Recommendations to Better Protect Human Rights*

Australia has committed to the international community to reconsider issues including the absence of a national Human Rights Act, same-sex marriage equality and mandatory immigration detention in Geneva overnight.

Appearing before the UN Human Rights Council, the Australian Government committed to give full and proper consideration to 145 recommendations made by the international community last week to improve Australia's human rights performance. The recommendations arose from a major United Nations review in which 50 countries from across the world - including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Norway, New Zealand, Ghana, Mexico and South Africa - made a series of robust recommendations on how Australia could better protect and promote human rights.

Appearing before the Council, Australian Ambassador to the United Nations, Peter Woolcott, said that while the Government was not yet prepared to accept or reject any of the recommendations, it would fully consider and formally respond to each recommendation to the UN Human Rights Council in June 2011.

"We trust that the Australian Government's decision to delay its formal response to the recommendations means that it will give proper, meaningful and detailed consideration to each of the 145 recommendations to better protect human rights made by the international community," said Ben Schokman of the Human Rights Law Resource Centre, who was in Geneva to witness the Australian Government's response. "Between now and June, when it will provide its full response, Australia has the opportunity to close the gap between rhetoric and concrete action by accepting - and indeed taking steps to implement - these recommendations."

Despite many countries during the review congratulating Australia on recent Government commitments to strengthen human rights, many also made

strong recommendations on how Australia must do better to protect human rights, including urging that Australia enact a Human Rights Act, recognise same-sex marriage, abolish mandatory immigration detention and entrench the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution.

At today's session, Ambassador Woolcott, addressed the UN Human Rights Council but did not indicate the Government's position on any of the specific recommendations that were made. He did, however, acknowledge that Australia has much work to do in many areas, citing the significant social and economic disadvantage faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people, the prevalence of violence against women and children, and the continued practice of non-therapeutic sterilisation of children with disability as ongoing human rights issues that Australia must address.

"In the coming months, Australia's true commitment to human rights will be put to the test both at home and abroad," said Phil Lynch of the Human Rights Law Resource Centre. "Australia should be held to a high human rights standard. We tout ourselves as a 'principled advocate of human rights for all' and are a highly developed and democratised country. Despite this, we are as well known internationally for Aboriginal disadvantage and our treatment of asylum seekers as we are for barbecues and beaches. It is time for change."

Les Malezer, of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, said that this is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. "We've seen a number of positive steps taken by the Australian Government, such as the apology to the stolen generations and endorsement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, now is the time for action. How will the Government respond to these recommendations? What concrete steps will the Government take beyond the mere rhetoric?", asked Mr Malezer.

"As an affluent, highly developed, stable democracy, Australia has no excuse for continuing to neglect some of its most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations," said Mr Schokman. "Australia can and should do better, and adopting the recommendations made by the international community will be an important step to improving Australia's human rights

record.”

The review, known as the Universal Periodic Review, is a process which provides all 193 UN countries the opportunity to ask questions and make recommendations regarding the human rights performance of each country under review.

Many of the issues and recommendations raised during the review of Australia closely reflected many of those identified by an Australian NGO Coalition in submissions to the UN and meetings and briefings with foreign diplomats in Geneva. The Coalition, which represents over 70 leading human rights organisations, includes the Human Rights Law Resource Centre, the National Association of Community Legal Centres, Women’s Legal Services NSW, the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, Kingsford Legal Centre and Australian Lawyers for Human Rights.

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The Draft Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Australia is available [here](#).

The Response of Australia to the Draft Report, delivered by Australia’s Ambassador to the UN in Geneva is [here](#).