



الاتحاد الأسترالي للمجالس الإسلامية

**THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF
ISLAMIC COUNCILS INC.**

A.R.B.N. 002 757 155

**HEAD OFFICE - 932 BOURKE STREET, ZETLAND, SYDNEY NSW 2017
PO BOX 7185 SSBH, Alexandria NSW 2015**

Tel: (02) 9319 6733 Fax: (02) 9319 0159 Email: admin@afic.com.au www.afic.com.au

30 January 2009

The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils Submission

Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century

Australian Human Rights Commission (HREOC)

Introduction

AFIC, the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, Australia's leading Islamic organization is appreciative of the HREOC's initiation into a study on the very important issue of Freedom of Religion and Belief in the 21st Century.

Recent studies have clearly demonstrated that whilst we are now 9 nine years into a new century, the prejudices and intolerant views harbored by some members of Australia's diverse community has not unfortunately matured over this new era in the modern world.

The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils welcomed the establishment of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia and Australian Partnership of Religious Organizations (APRO) and their roles in further building harmony between faith groups. We are confident this partnership will be able to explore ways to develop new and stronger relationships based on respect and understanding to meet the growing and complex needs of the community.

As you are aware, the Australian Muslim community is large, diverse and heterogeneous, composed of at least 120 ethnic and/or linguistic backgrounds, each with their unique cultural norms, but with one unifying element, we are all AUSTRALIANS.

As such, the Australian Muslims deserve every opportunity to fully participate in the Australian community as equal Australians, no different to the other Australians living up the street from them. It is also true that one of the most disadvantaged communities in Australia is the Muslim community, many of whom have newly arrived from war ravaged parts of the world some with little or no English language skills.

Addressing these types of issues are common goals of Government sectors as well as Islamic organizations, which are generally presented with complexities of many issues. Therefore, there is merit, both on the side of Government and its various agencies and Islamic organizations in seeking equitable culturally appropriate solutions to many of the issues that present themselves on a daily basis.

These are challenging issues and we acknowledge this but these difficulties should not come in the way of the very basic and fundamental human right of freedom of religion and belief as required by article 18(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).



الاتحاد الأسترالي للمجالس الإسلامية

**THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF
ISLAMIC COUNCILS INC.**

A.R.B.N. 002 757 155

**HEAD OFFICE - 932 BOURKE STREET, ZETLAND, SYDNEY NSW 2017
PO BOX 7185 SSBH, Alexandria NSW 2015**

Tel: (02) 9319 6733 Fax: (02) 9319 0159 Email: admin@afic.com.au www.afic.com.au

This right encompasses freedom of thought on all matters and the freedom to manifest religion and belief individually or with others, in public or private.

Australian Values

Over the recent past, the Muslims community in Australia has been under particular pressure to embrace the ‘Australian Values’ with the suggestion that Muslims in particular do not share these values. And one of these Australian values is that of a ‘Fair Go’. But from time to time one has to say that the treatment of Australian Muslims leaves a lot to be desired of this very basic of Australian values of Fair Go.

Let us be quite clear about Islam’s view and the shared view of Muslims- truth, justice, compassion and kindness are all virtues that Muslims cherish and live by and are these not the same values Australia wishes to instill in its citizens. So, there is no conflict of values.

The very harmless and basic requirement of the dressing up of Muslim women has become an issue that comes up from time to time and it seems that it is every ones basic right to make this a good political issue if it suits them.

International Events & Media

On the other hand, the impact of international terrorism has a negative impact on the lives of Muslims in all areas of Australia, with most impact on Muslim women for their distinctive dress code.

It seems rather ironic, during the recent tragic events in Gaza, while most Australians were appalled at devastation and trauma relayed in news bulletins, all the TV channels were screening movies or TV dramas demonizing “people of Middle Eastern appearance”. Was this some how an attempt to minimize the pain and suffering of the Gazans and to remind viewers that Muslims are their enemy! We understand media ratings, and the value that is placed on the channel that has the highest rated show, but is it acceptable at the expense and denigration of an entire faith group?

As far as the media and communication is concerned, sensational reporting of events and pointing a guilty finger at the Muslims in general needs to be addressed more vigorously.

On the reverse side, our Imams in particular need to address the use and manner of their language. AFIC supports calls for measures to ensure media organizations fulfill their obligations to be socially responsible, fair, accurate, thorough, comprehensive, and balanced in their reporting. Increased representation of CALD people on the editorial and management boards of major print and broadcast media bodies would also help alleviate misrepresentation of CALD and religiously diverse groups.



الاتحاد الأسترالي للمجالس الإسلامية

**THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF
ISLAMIC COUNCILS INC.**

A.R.B.N. 002 757 155

**HEAD OFFICE - 932 BOURKE STREET, ZETLAND, SYDNEY NSW 2017
PO BOX 7185 SSBH, Alexandria NSW 2015**

Tel: (02) 9319 6733 Fax: (02) 9319 0159 Email: admin@afic.com.au www.afic.com.au

Partnerships & Training

We acknowledge inroads that have been made over the years in many aspects of service provision at a managerial level. However, much work needs yet to be done for the messages to filter through from management to “customer service”.

Current services focus on assisting low and disadvantaged Australians. It is important to note that many growing social problems are not restricted to those on low incomes. The increased general rates of mental illness, drug use, child abuse, domestic violence and family relationship breakdown in the community indicates services will need to respond not just to the disadvantaged but to causes of these social problems in the greater community.

The value of partnership in this process is vital. AFIC is well placed, due to its close collaboration with State Islamic Councils and local Islamic Societies to provide ongoing information and feedback on specific services and support structure requirements based on the needs of their local residents.

We support your draft recommendation for reform in religious vilification legislation and the lack of constitutional protections against wrongful detention and deportation. We also echo your sentiments that the Government should support faith based schools that will provide a regulatory framework for curricula to help avoid the proliferation of non regulated “backyard” schools. Providing religious schools, where qualified teachers are employed and schools are supervised by state board of education, reduces the risk of extreme teachings.

Over the past year there have been applications from a number of organizations to establish mosques or schools in many parts of Australia. There has been very loud opposition to most of these with the authorities and governments generally playing politics and not standing up strongly for the freedom of these applications to be judged purely on their merits. A lot more sincerity is required from all to counter the bigoted attitude of some within the wider community.

In conclusion, we reiterate the importance of collaboration, partnerships and dialogue between Government and not for profit interfaith organizations on these pertinent issues confronted by the Muslim community and wider community and its ongoing effective delivery of services.

We look forward to working with you on an ongoing basis with a commitment to enrich and better the lives of all Australians.

Ikebal Adam Patel
President

Australian Federation of Islamic Councils