



**SENATOR THE HON GEORGE BRANDIS QC
ATTORNEY-GENERAL**

Monday 19 October 2015

**SPEECH AT THE LAUNCH OF AUSTRALIA'S CANDIDACY FOR MEMBERSHIP
OF THE UNITED NATION'S HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE, CANBERRA**

Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past and present. Can I acknowledge my friend and parliamentary colleague, Julie Bishop, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and other members of Parliament, in particular members of the Parliament's Human Rights Committee and Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee who join us this morning. May I acknowledge the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, His Excellency Pedro Villagra, Ambassador of Argentina, and the many other members from the Diplomatic Corps who are assembled here this morning. Can I acknowledge Professor Gillian Triggs, the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission and Mr Tim Wilson, Australia's Human Rights Commissioner. May I acknowledge the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr Peter Varghese and the Secretary of my own Department, Mr Chris Moraitis. And last but not least can I acknowledge the many officers of the International Law and Human Rights Division of my Department, the Attorney-General's Department, who will have a vital role in prosecuting Australia's candidacy for the Human Rights Council in 2018-2020.

So much of what I wanted to say has already been said by my colleague, Julie Bishop, so it merely falls to me to support and add to her remarks. Australia has always been a liberal democracy. In fact, Australia is one of the few nations in the world which has only ever been a liberal democracy. We have been a liberal democracy for as long as we have been a nation. And, therefore, certain assumptions about, and a commitment to, human rights is essential to the very nature of what it means to be an Australian.

In this, the year in which we commemorate the 800th Anniversary of the Magna Carta, we, in particular, celebrate those liberal democratic values - the freedom of speech; of freely elected parliaments; representative and responsible government; the social, political, economic rights of the individual; the right to be free from unlawful discrimination.

Across the entire panoply of human rights Australia has not only been an activist, but those rights are integral to what we Australians regard as our sense of nationhood. And not only is Australia one of the world's great liberal democracies, we are also, as the Foreign Minister has said, one of the world's most successful multicultural societies. And we are also, it should never be forgotten, one of the world's most generous societies to displaced people who seek to come to Australia under humanitarian and refugee programs. We take in more people in need as a proportion of our population than almost any other nation in the world. Occasionally, and Minister Bishop alluded to this, there may be domestic political debate about human rights, and that is a good thing that there should be such debate, but that debate takes place against the background of Australia being one of the world's most rights respecting, one of the world's most tolerant and one of the world's most generous nations.

Since the election of the Coalition Government in 2013 we have pursued an ambitious human rights agenda. We have, I believe with success, enlarged the scope and focus of the Australian Human Rights Commission so that it is no longer merely an anti-discrimination commission, but a commission whose role is to be the trustee of all human rights, including importantly, but not exclusively, the right to freedom from discrimination. We have encouraged renewed debate in Australia about the civil and political rights. Only last month I received a report from the Australian Law Reform Commission which reviewed the entire Commonwealth statutes against a benchmark of compliance with traditional common law rights and liberties. We have, as Minister Bishop has said, been active in the international arena in relation to many human rights causes, in particular our campaign against the death penalty and the promotion of the economic and social rights of women and girls.

Domestically we have pursued a busy agenda, led by the Human Rights Commissioner, Tim Wilson, to identify and eliminate any remaining forms of discrimination against gay people. Led by Mick Gooda, we have engaged constructively with the Indigenous community, in particular to ensure that Australia's Indigenous people are empowered, not only socially and politically, but also economically so that the rights that they have in their land and in their property are real, realisable rights, not merely theoretical, legal rights, and that of course in advance of the national referendum on the constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples that will take place in the next term of the Parliament.

As a Liberal, I am proud that Australia has been so active, both domestically and internationally in the promotion of a vigorous, ambitious human rights agenda. Australia's candidacy to become a member of the United Nation's Human Rights Council for the 2018-2020 term is the most natural thing in the world for a country which, at its core, is a nation built on a belief in, and a commitment to, the human rights of all, the human rights of all Australians and the human rights of all the peoples of the world.

It is with great pleasure that I join my colleague Julie Bishop in co-launching this important campaign.

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