

28 February 2017

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Submission to Foreign Policy White Paper

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to Government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism so as to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

Key message

Australia's Foreign Policy should be underpinned by conscious reference to, and understanding of, the multicultural nature of its population. Policy should reflect the dynamic character of that multiculturalism. In this respect it is important to note that multiculturalism is not simply a restatement of the fact of cultural diversity.¹ It is an aspiration; an ongoing project in which harmony is achieved and culture retained. It is diversity accepted and embraced. Australia's successful achievement of this goal is both dependent upon, and should be reflected in, its foreign policy agenda.

Increased access and flow of information, in addition to connection through cultural origin, mean that the citizenry are increasingly literate in issues affecting foreign policy. This is particularly so for those with social, familial and economic connections to countries likely to be affected by policy decisions. The concerns generated as a result of those connections are a relevant consideration in the context of foreign policy making. Foreign policy has the capacity to have a dramatic effect on domestic cohesion and should be formulated accordingly. It is inherently a multi-purpose and multi-value activity.²

Consultation with Communities

Australia's 'national interest' or 'critical interest' that guides the development and performance of our foreign policy must reflect the changing interests of, and opportunities presented by, Australia's multicultural society. Governments must engage and consult with

¹ Hill, C. 'Bringing War Home: Foreign Policy-Making in Multicultural Societies' *International Relations* 21(3): 259-283 (2007).

² Ibid.

communities regarding policies that affect their regions of origin; they must also be cognizant of the likely impact of any decision on cohesion between communities. Engagement does not, of necessity, require deference to a diasporic expression of interest, but it does suggest the need when conflicting interests are prioritised for proper explanation and clarification.

The consequence of failing to properly incorporate the populace in its diversity into foreign policy decision making is to create a further gap between the governed and their leadership. To do so is to weaken the sense of national unity that so many generations of Australians have worked to create.

Foreign Aid Spending

Australia's foreign aid spending, expressed as a percentage of gross national income, has been reduced to its lowest point in the nation's history.³ In the context of shifting economic markets, ongoing conflicts and unprecedented forced population movement this reduction is particularly questionable. This becomes further pronounced in the context of the priority Australia has given to immigration matters and the related question of asylum for dispossessed persons. The policy of working to actively detect and prevent asylum seekers must, at a minimum, be balanced with a strengthened commitment to reducing the factors creating vast numbers of persons seeking asylum. The only effective means for addressing this is to assist the countries from which refugee movement originates in protecting vulnerable communities from the impact of climate change, promoting peace and in building capacity to provide opportunities for meaningful futures for their populations.

It is of note in this regard that the two regions most affected by the cuts to the foreign aid budget are the Middle East with a 43% reduction in aid and Sub-Saharan Africa with a 70% percent reduction since 2013.⁴ The stability and prosperity of these regions will have lasting impacts upon Australia and the rest of the globe's economic and security interests. The decision to reduce the quantum of aid delivered to these areas should be rethought.

It is further of note that many other nations have increased their aid budgets in response to global crises. In particular the United Kingdom has enshrined in law an obligation to meet the OECD's target of foreign aid to Gross National Income ratio of .7%.⁵ At .25%⁶ Australia falls well below this target and no longer holds a place in the top ten global donors. This will likely see Australia lose influence with some development partners and with its peers in framing the global debate on development.⁷

International Treaty Obligations

Australia should give close consideration to its obligations to the global community as expressed in the international instruments to which it is a signatory. These obligations are primarily reflected through domestic policy, but without ensuring they are ratified through domestic legislation, Australia's moral authority to influence and participate in discussions regarding the conduct of other nations is significantly weakened.

³ Howes, S. and Pryke, J. 'Biggest aid cuts ever produce our least generous aid budget ever' *DEVPOLICYBLOG* (Development Policy Centre Australian National University) 15 December 2014 <http://devpolicy.org/biggest-aid-cuts-ever-produce-our-least-generous-aid-budget-ever-20141215-2/>

⁴ Lowy Institute for International Policy *Aid and Development-Australian in the World: Australian Foreign Aid* Monday 27 February 2017 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/issues/australian-foreign-aid>

⁵ *International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015* ch12(1) (UK)

⁶ Tomar, R. 'The ever-shrinking aid budget' *Budget review 2015-16 Index*, Research paper series, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2013

⁷ Above n4.

Cultural Communities as Resources

Australia is home to communities of people from every nation on Earth. Many of these people are highly skilled in a broad spectrum of industries and are from places with whom Australia intends to maintain, or in some cases increase, its cultural and economic connections. Policy makers should search for innovative ways to harness the resource represented by these persons and their communities. In the fields of science, technology, engineering, education, mathematics and the arts Australia should draw upon its rich and diverse population as a unique means of fostering partnerships with key global players in developing industries as they emerge.

Conclusion

As a nation defined by its cultural diversity, Australia is uniquely placed to meet the challenges of a changing global structure. In order to do so successfully we as a nation must remain conscious of the interplay between foreign and domestic policy, and the impact of our multiculturalism on both.

Further, Australia must remain cognizant of our ability as a middle power to impact global policy and how our contribution to foreign aid and commitment to human rights, expressed through international agreements, affects that ability.

Most importantly, Australia should maintain its commitment to finding innovative ways to harness the enormous asset inherent in its rich and diverse population in responding to the changing nature of the global economy.