

I attended the Human Rights consultation in Sydney on 17th March 2009, which I found both informative and thought provoking. There were many different points of view expressed on a wide range of human rights issues, some of which I hadn't even thought about before, which only proves to demonstrate the size and complexity of this issue.

At the consultation we were asked to give our views on three questions. In reply to the first question: "Which human rights (including corresponding responsibilities) should be protected and promoted?" I would like to say that the rights of our indigenous people should be first and foremost as they are the ones that have suffered the most horrendous human rights abuses, in the past in the form of; genocide, the stolen generation, and land rights, and continuing to suffer from abuses today through; inadequate health care, education, and poor housing to name just a few. It is a terrible indictment to this country that many of our indigenous communities are living in third world conditions, and this goes against the basic principles of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which upholds non discrimination, equality, and fairness for all people.

On a more personal level I would like to express my concerns on human rights for people in same sex relationships, in respect to marriage, adoption of children, and next of kin issues. As a lesbian I am discriminated against in all these areas and more, including social and workplace ridicule and/or harassment, and at this point in time there is no federal law to protect me from such discrimination. Current anti discrimination laws vary from state to state, and information is not easily obtainable which makes it very difficult for people living in same sex relationships to know exactly what their rights are and how they can defend them.

I'd like to highlight a recent experience I had when my partner had to go to hospital last year for a knee operation. Following the operation her parents suggested that she should come home with them so that they could look after her for the 4-6 weeks it would take for her to recover. It struck me then that had she been more gravely ill and not able to make her own decision, then this could have happened. She could have been taken away from me, away from our home, and I would have no say in the matter. If I was not on good terms with my partner's family then I might never see her again! How frightening is this? The laws on next of kin issues relating to same sex couples are very grey and need defining so that couples in same sex relationships are not discriminated against in situation like this.

The second question "Are these human rights currently sufficiently protected and promoted?" Well the answer can only be no. I don't feel that my human rights are protected on the issues raised above, and they certainly are not promoted because I've found it very difficult to get accurate information on anti discrimination laws pertaining to same sex relationships. There needs to be a clear act that represents all gay people on a national level to protect them from all forms of discrimination, regardless of where in Australia they choose to live.

In answer to the final question "How could Australia better protect and promote human rights?" I think a Human Rights Act at federal level is needed to represent all people living in this country and to protect them from discrimination based on race,

sex, gender, age, religion, political or social prejudices. We also need a national education program to promote human rights perhaps starting with a media campaign to raise community awareness, and then continuing through other forms of education.

Of course there are many human rights that are already protected under the Australian constitution, but there are also many ongoing abuses as was apparent from the broad range of issues that were raised at the consultation. I feel our current human rights laws are outdated and inadequate and need to be seriously addressed. It would be nice to think that Australia could be a model for other countries on human rights issues, but it would mean a massive undertaking on both political and community levels to achieve this.

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