

Strategies against Racism Forum: Statement of Participants

**Ethnic Communities Council of NSW Inc and
Australian Human Rights Information Centre, University of NSW**

Waterloo, 16 June 1997

Belatedly, migrants who have come to Australia have recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples possess unique identities, histories and aspirations. Non-indigenous Australians are beginning to comprehend the prior occupation and ownership of Indigenous Australians, their continuing dispossession, and their special place in the life of the nation.

Within non-Indigenous Australia, there is a growing desire to apologise to Indigenous Australians for the hurt done to them, their ancestors and their lands over the last 209 years.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are committing themselves to reconciliation and better relationships, so that we can constitute a united Australia, respecting the land, valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage, and providing equity and justice for all.

As values of reconciliation and coexistence are being affirmed, there is also growing appreciation of the extraordinary cultural, linguistic and religious diversity that migrants and refugees have brought to Australia. This diversity constitutes an invaluable contribution to the life of the nation. As we approach the Centenary of Federation, Australians from all walks of life are wanting to affirm a sense of nationhood which encompasses all ethnic and religious groups.

At the same time, there is growing concern within the community about current trends promoting intolerance, discrimination and inequality. Increasing manifestations of racism pose a serious threat to fundamental human rights and to social cohesion. Voices of protest are calling for action to address racism and to affirm the principles of tolerance, non-discrimination and equality as fundamental values in our society.

On 16 June 1997, representatives of community groups from across Australia met in Waterloo, Sydney to discuss strategies to combat racism and promote racial harmony. The participants agreed upon the following statement:

General

1. The Forum calls on parliaments, local governments, institutions and organisations to offer their own form of **apology** for the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples so that we can all move forward to share the responsibility for the future.
2. The Forum affirms that the protection and promotion of human rights is a matter of **legitimate international concern**. The advocacy of human rights and non-discrimination can be considered neither disloyal nor an encroachment upon national sovereignty.
3. The Forum calls on the Australian Parliament to follow the example of the European Parliament and organise an **Australian Year Against Racism**. The objective of such a year should be to allow a comprehensive debate reaching all levels of society and with the active participation of the citizenry.

Law and Policy

1. The Forum calls on Australian governments to maintain adequate levels of **funding to anti-discrimination and equal opportunity bodies** so that they can deal with complaints promptly and undertake comprehensive community education programs. The Forum considers the reduction of the budget of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission by 40% to be unacceptable and to reflect a disturbing down-grading of human rights by the present Federal Government.
2. Any changes to the **structures and procedures** of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) must be designed with a view to strengthening its capacity to deal with complaints of discrimination and conduct community education. The Forum emphasises the importance of safeguarding the independence of HREOC and retaining distinct portfolio commissioners.
3. The Forum calls on the Federal Government to facilitate consideration of the inclusion in the **Australian Constitution** of an explicit **prohibition of all forms of discrimination**, including racial discrimination, at the Peoples' Constitutional Convention scheduled for late this year.
4. The Forum affirms that there must never be any diminishment of the protection afforded by the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) or equivalent State and Territory laws. The Forum rejects as unacceptable the Federal Government's

“**ten-point plan**” in response to the decision of the High Court in *Wik*. The ten-point plan proposes to take away common law native title rights and upgrade the rights of pastoral lease-holders. Such discriminatory interference with the rights of Indigenous Australians is morally repugnant, contrary to Australia’s international obligations and diminishes our nation.

Education

1. The UN Plan of Action for the Decade for Human Rights Education calls for the completion during 1995 of **action-oriented national plans** for human rights education to be transmitted to the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Forum urges the Federal Government to endorse the objectives of the UN Decade for Human Rights Education and, in consultation with relevant NGOs and community organisations, to catalyse the elaboration of a national action plan. As affirmed by the August 1996 Sydney Workshop of Asia-Pacific Human Rights Educators, **human rights education** is itself a **human right**.
2. The Forum affirms the urgent need to **strengthen existing capacities for anti-racism and human rights education** in Australia, as well as to develop new capacities, at national and local levels. There is particular need to strengthen the capacity of **NGOs and civil society institutions** to play a central role in the planning and implementation of anti-racism and human rights education.
3. The Forum affirms the importance of **non-formal community education** about anti-discrimination and anti-vilification laws, and international human rights law, including general public information, education within trade-unions and women’s and youth organisations, and education in rural and remote communities.
4. Appropriate and effective **strategies for anti-racism and human rights** education should emphasise popular and participatory education. Such education must be rooted in the lives of learners, especially those most marginalised and vulnerable, and build on local concepts, cultural specificities and language needs.
5. The Forum calls on education authorities to work with community groups and educators in the **formal education sector**, including early childhood, primary and secondary schools, higher education, teacher training, to:

incorporate anti-racism values and awareness as a key element in education in schools; revise school curricula to integrate anti-racism and human rights education into the curriculum at all levels, produce training and educational materials, and develop in-service teacher training courses;

promote the teaching of human rights in universities, including in schools of law, economics, medicine, politics and social work.

6. The Forum affirms the need to provide anti-racism and human rights education to personnel in **law enforcement and the administration of justice**. Public officials and decision-makers in all areas of government, as well as particular professional groups such as media, health professionals and social workers should also receive anti-racism and human rights education.
7. All too often, important struggles for racial equality and human rights have been erased in history books and in national memory. The Forum affirms the important role for education in the recovery of human rights history and human rights truths. An urgent task for anti-racism and human rights education is to increase knowledge about the **histories, rights and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples**.

Media

1. In Australia, some media have tended to trivialise and sensationalise race issues. The Forum affirms that a media sensitive to issues of race and human rights can play a **crucial role** in raising awareness of racism and influencing opinions in the direction of tolerance and diversity, including amongst persons at all levels of literacy and living in rural or remote areas.
2. The Forum calls on Australian media, including ethnic and rural media, to set appropriate **standards of editorial policy and accountability** in relation to questions of race.

Advocacy and Community Action

The Forum urges community groups and NGOs to exchange information on good practice and effective strategies in combating racism; and to forge alliances and coordinate resources and action in lobbying and advocacy. ●