

Foreword

2001 proved a year of challenges in Australian race relations. I have expressed my concerns about the bipartisan political support for Australia's treatment of boat people, about the stalled reconciliation process and about retaliatory attacks on Australians from the Middle East in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the USA in September, among other trends. In the same period, during consultations preparatory to the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, my staff and I have been privileged to hear the concerns of many Australians about racism in our society and to receive many invaluable proposals which aim to eliminate it and protect its victims.

As I have stressed throughout this process, in order for the World Conference to move beyond rhetoric it had to relate to the day to day experiences of people at the local level, wherever and whoever they may be. Our focus here, therefore, is not on the international processes of the World Conference but on the domestic mechanisms that need to be reviewed, refined or in some cases begun at all levels of government, by my Commission and by civil society.

The responses and comments we received during the consultation process clearly demonstrate an overwhelming sense that racism and related forms of intolerance are serious problems that affect many people in Australian society. The consultations indicated that racially discriminatory practices are widespread, institutional in nature and practiced at all levels of society. Every community consultation identified the Indigenous people of Australia as those worst affected by racism. As one Indigenous woman stated during the consultations:

"We just live with racism every day. It's like getting up, washing your face and having a cup of tea."

I was particularly struck by the widespread acknowledgment that Australia's colonial history is the principal cause of the racism experienced today. The privileged position of the colonisers has historically been maintained at the expense of the Indigenous people and those from non-English speaking backgrounds and this has led to a sense of marginalisation for those who do not fit the stereotype of the "typical" Australian.

We are confident that the process we commenced with the civil society consultations will develop initiatives which will reduce and ultimately eliminate racism from Australian society. Our aim and duty as Australians is to provide equality and respect for each other within our civil society. It was put succinctly by a participant in the Orange NSW consultation on 24 July 2001:

*"I don't want to be tolerated.
You can tolerate a headache.
I want to have respect and equality."*

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Introduction

This summary reports on the outcomes of national civil society consultations on racism conducted by the Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner and his staff from May to August 2001. It reflects the issues, concerns and suggestions raised by those who responded to our invitation to participate by writing submissions or attending public meetings or focus groups. The information we received provided the basis for the Commissioner's contribution at the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban South Africa from 31 August - 7 September 2001.

The World Conference presented us with a timely opportunity to examine the status of racism in Australia. With the financial assistance of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Commission has conducted the following activities:

- Release of the discussion paper, *Combating racism in Australia*;
- Invitation to the public to provide written submissions on racism;
- Launch of moderated bulletin board on racism on the Commission's website (www.humanrights.gov.au/worldconference);
- Launch of issues paper on the intersectionality of race and gender;
- National Youth Summit on Racism;
- National Summit on Civil Society on Racism;
- 15 regional civil society consultations across Australia;
- Financial and organisational support for 3 state-based youth forums on racism;
- Financial and organisational support for 3 gender and race forums;
- Focus groups with refugee and migrant women;
- Focus groups with Indigenous women; and
- Consultations with Victorian Indigenous organisations.

The success of the regional civil society consultations was enhanced by state and local government agencies and a wide range of community organisations and individuals who provided additional valuable support and assistance. The details and outcomes of these activities are available on the Commission's WCAR website www.humanrights.gov.au/worldconference.

This summary and the compilation of records from all the regional consultations are but one step in an ongoing process. Following the World Conference, we will conduct further consultations with civil society to feed back the practical actions identified here and through the World Conference process, to stimulate further debate and to identify best practice for addressing racism in Australian society.

The next major phase in this process will be in March 2002 at a National Conference to present the findings of these consultations and to develop a national plan of action for combating racism in Australia.