



# The Human Rights Council of Australia

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## INTERIM REPORT TO NATIONAL AUSTRALIA BANK NATIONAL VALUES PROJECT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 1997 and 1998 the Human Rights Council of Australia became increasingly concerned about divisions in Australian society. The Council and its members, through their work in many parts of Australia and through the research and analysis they had access to, became convinced that these divisions were growing. The divisions were usually typified as being between city and country, haves and have-nots, elites and battlers, indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

The Council saw a need for a national campaign to strengthen key Australian values of respect, tolerance, diversity and a fair go as a timely and strategic response to these divisions. It approached the National Australian Bank (NAB) for funding assistance to enable it to undertake a feasibility study for a national campaign to strengthen values. This interim report discusses the progress of the feasibility study.

The study identified continuing widespread alienation and anger in the Australian community. Although the symptoms and expression of the alienation and anger have changed over the last two years, these basic characteristics remain very much alive in the community and indeed may well be more deep-seated than previously. As in the recent past they continue to target the weaker and more vulnerable people and communities in Australia with damaging repercussions for Australian society as a whole and for Australia's international reputation.

As part of the study the Council undertook a survey of organisations, individuals and government at different levels. It found that its concerns were shared by most of those surveyed. There is widespread concern at the continuing tensions bubbling beneath the surface in many communities around Australia.

The survey also uncovered an inspiring level of commitment and a variety of responses to these challenges in corporate Australia, community organisations and local government. In some circumstances these responses have been driven by very practical concerns about the costs to organisations, businesses and communities of continuing division, intolerance and lack of respect for others.

The Council is convinced that the alienation and anger must be addressed effectively if they are not to become entrenched and lead to permanent damaging divisions. This will require positive programs to build social cohesion, not negative criticism that is easily characterised as an elite response.

The Council's study indicates that a series of initiatives to learn from, build on, extend and sustain existing good practice would be the most strategic approach to strengthening the values underpinning a forward looking Australia, at ease with itself and respected in the region and wider world. It has found that, although the issues remain the same, the context has changed significantly over the last two years. As a result, the study establishes that a diverse approach is required rather than the kind of single focus national campaign originally envisaged.

This interim report therefore does not outline a national campaign. Rather it presents the conclusions of the Council's study and provides a number of options for action, which could be taken up by the Council, the National Australia Bank and other potential sponsors.

The Council has concluded that

- the alienation and divisions evident in Australia are widespread and can be characterised as a national phenomenon but they are particularly evident in outer urban and rural areas and are affected by specific factors in different places
- the ways in which some businesses have operated have increased the sense of anger and alienation in regional and rural Australia
- the business community and local government are among the key sectors concerned at the economic and social effects of division and the undermining of key values of respect and tolerance and they are very active in many ways in seeking to address these issues
- existing business and local government initiatives need to be built on and extended as both sectors could do significantly more to engage with the communities in which they operate and to promote tolerant communities and workplaces
- the movement for reconciliation is one of the most significant developments in community action in recent years and particular and urgent attention should be given to the need to sustain and focus it after the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is wound up in December 2000

- a national, centrally coordinated campaign as envisaged in the project proposal is not the most strategic approach to addressing the project's longer term aims of reinforcing values of tolerance, respect and pluralism and would be unlikely to secure the necessary commitments from an already overburdened and under-resourced community sector
- effective responses to divisions in the community must be location and often organisation specific, address specific local factors and target individuals and organisations influential within those communities.

The centenary of Australian federation, will see considerable focus on national goals and directions. The centenary can provide an ideal environment in which to nurture the values of respect, tolerance and pluralism that have built modern Australia. Already Coles Myer has contributed \$3 million to become the first patron of the government program to commemorate the year. There is some urgency, therefore, in developing and implementing appropriate local initiatives, through partnerships between national organisations and local communities, to take advantage of the centenary year to promote national cohesion based on positive values.

The Human Rights Council of Australia suggests that, following discussion of this interim report with the NAB, the interim report should be presented to a workshop of a small number of key people from business, government, non government organisations and communities from around Australia. This workshop could be funded from the existing NAB grant to the Council and would aim to provide guidance on future directions.

The Council is willing to explore with the NAB issues of implementation of any of the action proposals in this report or arising from the workshop, whether through the Council itself or through other organisations or individuals.



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