Australian Multicultural Council

Interfaith and social cohesion in Australia: looking to the future

The Australian Multicultural Council's report to the Australian Government

June 2014

Contents

Letter from Council Chair to Minister Andrews

Dear Minister,

Following the delivery of the Council's report *The Australian Community* to the Government on 19 December 2013, you extended the term of the Australian Multicultural Council to 30 June 2014. You tasked us to continue our exploration into social cohesion, including the potential to improve interfaith and intercultural dialogue, and opportunities to work with local government to foster cohesion and community resilience.

Australia has a story to tell the world, one of which we should be proud. We are a successful multicultural and multifaith nation, and we are host to rich and harmonious interfaith dialogues. We rank highly by international, national, and local standards of social cohesion.

Findings from our report highlighted both challenges and opportunities for social cohesion in Australian communities. Australia is a nation of growing religious diversity, and religion is closely linked to cultural and individual identity. The Council is of the view that there is a need for continuing support for interfaith and intercultural dialogues to promote and sustain social cohesion into Australia's future.

While there are challenges to fostering interfaith dialogues in Australia, the Council has identified that there is a continuing role for the Australian Government in supporting interfaith dialogues and has outlined opportunities for the Government to continue to foster a strong and prosperous nation.

The Council hopes that our advice to the Australian Government regarding interfaith dialogue will build upon and extend the opportunities for social cohesion we outlined in our 2013 report *The Australian Community*.

Yours sincerely,

Judge Rauf Soulio
Chair, Australian Multicultural Council

30 June 2014

Introduction: Promoting and sustaining social cohesion in Australia

This report seeks to build on Australia's strong levels of social cohesion by providing opportunities for the Australian Government to support interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in our nation.

Australia is a peaceful, harmonious and resilient nation. This is in large part due to our robust liberal democracy and our strong brand of multiculturalism. Australia's approach to multiculturalism recognises the economic and social benefits of diversity; balances the rights and responsibilities that are fundamental to living in Australia; and supports the rights of all to celebrate, practise and maintain their cultural traditions within the law and free from discrimination.

By international comparisons, Australia ranked among the top countries across a large number of topics related to social cohesion and wellbeing in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's *Better Life Index*. The Scanlon Foundation's 2013 *Mapping Social Cohesion National Report* also confirmed that, by international standards, Australia remained highly cohesive.

The Australian community reflects very high levels of acceptance of multiculturalism across all demographics, with 84 per cent of respondents agreeing 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia'. A key ingredient of our socially cohesive society is support and participation from the Australian people. Our community is founded upon a generous, mutually supporting culture and promotes unity and civic responsibility, also evidenced in our active civil society.

While social cohesion remains strong at national and local levels, the 2013 *Mapping Social Cohesion Report* also identified some issues that warranted attention:

- There was a sharp increase in the reported incidence of discrimination (19 per cent in 2013, up from 12 per cent in 2012).
- There was a continued decline in personal and institutional trust (45 per cent of respondents in 2013 agreed that 'most people can be trusted', compared to 52 per cent in 2012).
- Some localities of high migrant concentration also had lower socio-economic indicators and reported poorly on indicators of social cohesion (Scanlon Foundation 2013 *Local Areas Report*).

A successful multicultural society and a strong cohesive nation are essential to our national interest. Given the issues referred to above as well as incidences of community tensions discussed in our 2013 report *The Australian Community*, the Council is of the view that ensuring Australian communities remain cohesive and resilient should be a continuing priority for the Australian Government.

Structure of the report

Chapter One outlines the history and context of interfaith in Australia, including past Government interfaith activities. It tells a story of Australia's increasing cultural and religious diversity, which creates a need for interfaith and intercultural dialogues to foster and sustain social cohesion. Chapter Two examines the main challenges and issues encountered when creating interfaith dialogues to foster social cohesion. Chapter Three explores opportunities for strengthening interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in Australia, and considers the Australian Government's role in supporting interfaith dialogue.

Guiding principles

- Interfaith dialogue should be inclusive, involving and engaging secular and non-faith groups, free thinkers, women, youth and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups.
- Interfaith dialogue should promote social cohesion and anti-racism.
- Interfaith dialogue should be about valuing diversity.
- Interfaith dialogue has value at all levels, including local, national, regional and global levels.

Dr Hass Dellal, OAM, moderator of the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

'Interfaith dialogue needs to embrace all world views, and this includes atheist, humanist, rationalist, and secular groups. There are different beliefs in society between 'the religious' and 'the secularists', and interfaith needs to move beyond its traditional boundaries and engage with difference and the challenges this brings, and help build a cohesive society.'

Dr Hass Dellal, OAM, moderator address at the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Chapter One: Religion and interfaith dialogue in Australia

Diversity is both a fact and a strength of modern liberal Australia.

Diverse Australia

Australia is and will continue to be a diverse nation. As the Council noted in our 2013 report *The Australian Community*, diversity is both a fact and a strength of modern liberal Australia.

This diversity has a long history, beginning with Australia's first peoples and increasing significantly with migration after the Second World War.

Today, Australia's resident population of 23 million includes about 5.3 million people born overseas.[1] Australians identify with around 300 ancestries and languages, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. The most recent Census figures showed that 47 per cent of Australians were born overseas or had overseas-born parents.[2]

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population also increased by 20.5 per cent since the 2006 Census,[3] constituting around 3 per cent of the Australian population.[4] Almost 4 million people speak a language other than English at home,[5] indicating increasing linguistic diversity.

Religious diversity in Australia

Australia's diversity includes a rich religious tapestry. Since the first Census, the majority of Australians have reported an affiliation with a Christian religion, yet there has been a long-term decrease in affiliation to Christianity from 96 per cent in 1911 to 61 per cent in 2011.[6] Even in the past decade, the proportion of the population affiliated with a Christian religion has decreased from 68 per cent in 2001 to 61 per cent in 2011.

There have also been corresponding increases in affiliations to non-Christian religions, and those of non-faith backgrounds reporting 'No Religion'.

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[1]   Access and Equity Inquiry Report 2012, p2.
[2]   http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2011/communityprofile/0?opendocument&nav pos=230 (Time Series data).
[3]   https://theconversation.com/australian-census-indigenous-australia-improves-but-closing-the-gap-is-a-long-way- off-7678.
[4]   http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30April+2013 (Cultural Diversity).
[5]   Department of Immigration and Border Protection 2013. Fact Sheet: Australia's Cultural Diversity.
[6]   The source of all data reported in the section 'Religious Diversity in Australia' of the Council's report is 2071.0 – Cultural Diversity in Australia: Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census, 2012–2013. Accessed from http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/2071.0main+features902012-2013.

Religious affiliations in Australia: 2011 Census

Religion	'000	Population %	Proportion born overseas [a] %
Christian	13,150.6	61.1	22.9
Catholic	5,439.2	25.3	24.0
Anglican	3,680.0	17.1	17.5
Uniting Church	1,065.8	5.0	11.4
Presbyterian and Reformed	599.5	2.8	26.3
Eastern Orthodox	563.1	2.6	43.6
Baptist	352.5	1.6	28.8
Lutheran	251.9	1.2	24.5
Pentecostal	238.0	1.1	32.6
Other Christian	960.7	4.5	31.0
Non-Christian	1,546.3	7.2	67.0
Buddhism	529.0	2.5	69.4
Islam	476.3	2.2	61.5
Hinduism	275.5	1.3	84.3
Judaism	97.3	0.5	48.9
Other non-Christian	168.2	0.8	57.2
No Religion	4,796.8	22.3	22.5
Total [b]	**21,507.7**	**100.0**	**26.1**

[a] Proportion of people reporting this religion who were born overseas.

[b] Total includes inadequately described (supplementary codes) religions and people who did not state a religion.

Non-Christian faiths have increased considerably in the past 10 years.

Non-Christian faiths have increased considerably in the last 10 years, constituting 7.2 per cent of the total population in 2011 (up from 4.9 per cent in 2001). The most common non-Christian religions in 2011 were:

- Buddhism (2.5 per cent of the population)
- Islam (2.2 per cent)
- Hinduism (1.3 per cent).

These figures represent increases in growth from 2001 of:

- 189 per cent for Hinduism
- 69 per cent for Islam
- 48 per cent for Buddhism.

Non-faith affiliations have increased in the past 10 years, especially among youth.

The number of people reporting 'No Religion' also increased from 15 per cent of the population in 2001 to 22 per cent in 2011. This is most evident among youth, with 28 per cent of people aged 15 to 34 reporting no religious affiliation. This could suggest that including youth in interfaith dialogue will require broadening interfaith dialogue to include non-faith groups.
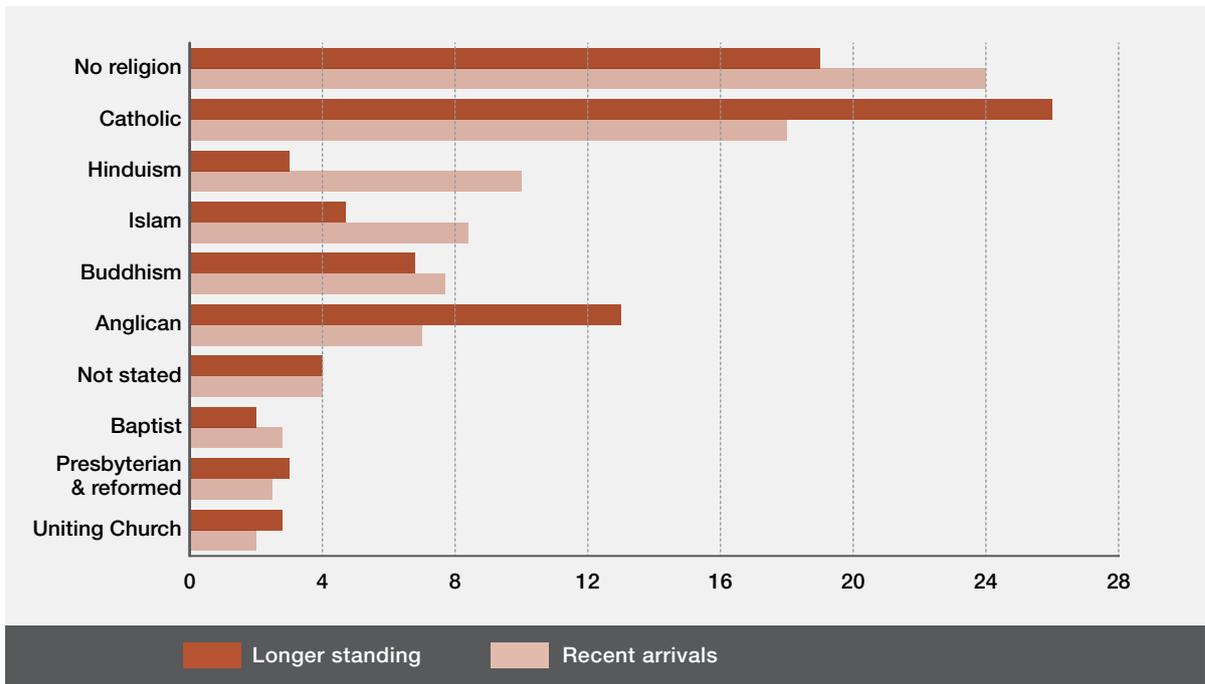
For the overseas-born population:

- over half (56 per cent) reported a Christian denomination
- 19 per cent reported a Non-Christian religion, with Buddhism (6.8 per cent), Islam (5.4 per cent) and Hinduism (4.3 per cent) being the most common
- 20 per cent reported 'No religion', slightly less than the Australian population as a whole (22 per cent).

Recent arrivals are more likely than longer-standing migrants to affiliate with religions other than Christianity.

Recent arrivals were less likely than longer-standing migrants to affiliate with Catholicism and Anglicanism. A high proportion of recent arrivals reported affiliations with Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, reflecting the increase of new arrivals from non-European Judeo-Christian countries. New arrivals were also more likely than longer-standing migrants to report 'No Religion'.

These increases in Australia's religious diversity point to the need for continuing dialogues between diverse religious and non-religious groups to promote and sustain social cohesion.

Selected religions - longer-standing and recently arrived migrants [a]

(a) Total includes inadequately described (supplementary codes) religions.

'The word interfaith is not new in any faith, in any religion'.

Dr Amin Hady, Imam, Zetland Mosque, presentation at Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Interfaith dialogue in Australia

Interfaith dialogue is the fostering of common, cooperative and positive interaction and dialogues within and between different religions to promote harmony, awareness and understanding.

Interfaith dialogue has a long history around the world. Since the bombings of the US World Trade Centre in New York on 11 September 2001, there has been a renewed global interest in interfaith dialogue as a means to combat extremism and promote tolerance and acceptance.

Australia has a history of interfaith dialogue dating back to the 1970s as a response to increased cultural and religious diversity. In the aftermath of September 2001, Australia's interfaith efforts have significantly increased. Australia has been one of the countries involved in the active establishment and convening of interfaith dialogues to reduce the likelihood of intercommunity conflict and build social cohesion.[7]

Dialogue is a new terrain on which we must live our respective religious/spiritual commitments if we want interfaith to be cutting edge.'

Dr Hass Dellal, OAM, moderator address at the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

The Council is of the view that interfaith dialogue provides a logical place to foster social cohesion. Religions themselves have much to add to social cohesion, being about not only believing, but bonding and bridging.[8] Interfaith dialogue can build social cohesion in Australia through creating resilient communities protected from extremism, intolerance or discrimination by shared awareness and understanding.

Dialogue is:

- an ongoing process
- an inclusive space
- a two-way process
- important at the national and the local level.

Ms Leanne Sargent, Executive Manager, Victoria Police Priority Communities Division, presentation at Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

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7   Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism 2013, p. 75.
8   Des Cahill 2014, presentation at the Australian Multicultural Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Local and state interfaith engagement and networks

There are many Australian examples of successful interfaith initiatives at the state and local level. A handful of examples, to give a sense of the breadth of initiatives, include:

- Victoria's 31 interfaith networks, including seven in regional Victoria
- the Northern Interfaith and Intercultural Network, launched in 2011, the first regional interfaith network in Australia, bringing together the five municipalities of Banyule, Darebin, Moreland, Hume and Whittlesea
- the Victoria Police Multifaith Council, established in 2005
- the Council of Christians and Jews, successful at the national and state levels
- the annual Catholic Bishops conversation with the Jewish community, and regular dialogues between the Uniting Church of Australia and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry
- Western Australia's history of interfaith dialogues that traverse both traditional explorations of religious beliefs (e.g. through local churches, mosques and synagogues) and also deal with youth-related issues and political questions (e.g. the Interfaith Election Forum held at the University of Western Australia in August 2013)
- youth interfaith dialogues such as the Somali youth outreach project run by the Horn of Africa Relief and Development Agency NSW, and the Southern Crescent Online Peace Initiative, an online website run by the Forum for Australian and Islamic relations NSW.

'In today's religious and secular world, increasingly to be religious means to be interreligious'.

Professor Des Cahill, OAM, Chair of Religions for Peace Australia, presentation at Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

National engagement in interfaith dialogue

Government interfaith initiatives date back to the 1990s and continue into the present.
The table below details government involvement through interfaith support and resourcing.

Year	National Interfaith Initiative
1997	Religion and Cultural Diversity conference with the Australian Multicultural Foundation.
Late 1990s/ early 2000s	Subsequent interfaith conferences and engagement by the Australian Multicultural Foundation involving the Australian Government, state governments, the European Multicultural Foundation, and Religions for Peace Australia.
2000s	Projects including: • the *Together for Humanity* project (2002-2007) which engaged schools and education communities to deliver programs involving interfaith and Indigenous presenters • 2008 *Youth Leadership Program* to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue between mainstream and minority communities • 2009 *Cultural Diversity Management Pilot Training Program* with the Australian Multicultural Foundation and the Scanlon Foundation.
2003	Establishment of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations.
2003	Launch of the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews by the then Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs.
2004	Supported the publication of: • *Muslim Australians, their beliefs, practices and institutions* by Professor Abdullah Saeed • *Constructing a local multifaith network* by Professor Desmond Cahill, Dr Michael Leahy and the Australian Multicultural Foundation • *Religion, cultural diversity and safeguarding Australia* with the Australian Multicultural Foundation, RMIT University and Monash University.
2005	Speech by then foreign minister on 'Interfaith Dialogue and Australian Approaches'.
2009	Parliament of the World's Religions event in Melbourne.
2011	Interfaith Forum at Parliament House with the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations and the then Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs.

Year	National Interfaith Initiative
2011	Publication of *Freedom of religion and belief in 21st century Australia*, part of a National Action Plan to Build Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security project with the Australian Human Rights Commission.
2013	Joint Standing Committee on Migration's *Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism in Australia* recommended that the Australian Government continue to support initiatives and dialogues that promote interfaith and intercultural understanding.
2014	Australian Multicultural Council's Interfaith Roundtable in Melbourne.

The 2013 Joint Standing Committee on Migration's *Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism in Australia* acknowledged the important role of interfaith relations and intercultural dialogue, especially in the last 10 years. The following recommendations were made:

Recommendation 4: The Committee recommends that the Australian Government continue to support initiatives that promote programs in Australian universities, institutions and the community sector, and jointly within the region, to promote intercultural and interfaith understanding; and

Recommendation 5: The Committee recommends the Australian Government develop a strategic plan to support the regular convening of interfaith and intercultural dialogues. Objectives, subject to appropriate measurement of outcomes, are to involve the broader community leadership, to better target settlement services, and to foster wider inter-community understanding.

The Inquiry noted that interfaith and intercultural dialogue and understanding were essential to social cohesion in Australia. The Council supports the above recommendations of the Inquiry and the continued involvement of the Australian Government in interfaith dialogue to promote and sustain social cohesion in Australia.

Australia in global context

Australia has a story to tell the world, one of which we should be proud. We are a successful multicultural and multifaith nation, and we are host to rich and harmonious interfaith dialogues. We rank highly by international, national, and local standards of social cohesion.

Australia is a nation of growing religious diversity, and the Council is of the view that there is a need for continuing support for interfaith and intercultural dialogues to promote and sustain social cohesion into Australia's future.

The Australian Government has a history of involvement in the interfaith space, increasing substantially in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks to ensure resilient and harmonious communities.

Interfaith dialogue is a key part of promoting and sustaining social cohesion in Australia. Interfaith dialogue can also help Australia engage successfully in the Australasian region, which is crucial for Australia's prosperity in the Asian Century. As has been observed, in many places around the world, understanding religion is imperative to understanding the local civil society.[9]

While there are challenges to fostering interfaith dialogues in Australia, the Council has identified opportunities for a continuing role for the Australian Government in supporting interfaith dialogues. The next chapters highlight the challenges and opportunities for Government involvement in interfaith dialogue in Australia.

> 'Australia should see promotion of religious identity, of religious liberty, and of multiculturalism as a foreign policy objective, something we can contribute to our region and beyond.'
>
> Mr Jeremy Jones, AM, Co-Chair of the Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews, presentation at the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

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[9] White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State's Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society: U.S. October 15 2012, p. 3.

Chapter Two: Challenges to fostering interfaith dialogue

Though there are many examples of successful interfaith initiatives in Australia, there are also challenges to establishing and maintaining interfaith dialogues.

'The whole journey of interfaith relations has three basic moments.

The first one is that of fear, loathing, othering, vilification, distancing, and protection.

The second takes the form of a kind of tolerance but sees diversity as something that can be managed.

There's a final step which is where diversity is actually valued for itself.'

Professor Gary Bouma, AM, UNESCO Chair in Intercultural and Interreligious Relations – Asia Pacific, summation at the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Religious tensions and extremism

In terms of the above 'journey of interfaith relations' outlined by Professor Bouma, Australia has long moved past the first stage of 'fear, loathing, othering, vilification, distancing and protection'.

Yet elements of this stage do arise now and again in the form of cultural and religious tensions, incidences of unrest, and discrimination, some of which we detail in our 2013 report *The Australian Community.*

The challenge is to manage these tensions and move towards a point where all Australians value and respect their differences, rather than observing that we are all the same.

Placing freedom of religious expression within the rule of law

Part of managing tensions also includes balancing freedom of religious expression with the rule of law in Australia. Sometimes misunderstandings can occur when freedom of religious expression and religious law is seen to take precedence over Australian law.

The challenge here is how to clearly communicate Australian law and policy to all Australians, especially to new arrivals. Australia's approach to multiculturalism supports the rights of all to celebrate, practise and maintain their cultural traditions *within the law* and to be free from discrimination.

Inclusion in interfaith

With recent demographic changes in Australia, there is a challenge to broaden our understanding and definition of the very concept of 'interfaith dialogue'. Some secular and humanist groups are of the view that the very term 'interfaith' is exclusive as it implies that interfaith dialogue is something that only occurs between faiths.

These groups point out that interfaith dialogue also needs to occur between faith and non-faith groups such as humanists, rationalists and free thinkers, and can take place between anyone as long as there is a spirit of goodwill.

Other groups viewed by the Council as a priority for inclusion and engagement in interfaith dialogue are women and youth. Given that 28 per cent of people aged 15-34 report having no religion, including non-faith groups in interfaith dialogues is of even greater importance. Engaging with youth on their own terms and in ways they relate to and identify with, such as issues-based causes, is also an important consideration.

Youth

'[Our group] looked at engaging young people in interfaith dialogue. It's very important that these young people have ownership of the programmes they would be doing… Something young people often say is "talk to us and utilise our skills rather than talking at us and telling us what to do". '

Intra-faith

'We talked about having intra-faith dialogue within your own faith. Unless we begin that intra-faith dialogue within our own communities we cannot identify and talk about those issues that are relevant like extremism…'

Women

'We talked about hospitality because the conversation starts around the table. And once that happens people engage at a different level and you build trust.'

Ms Maha Abdo, OAM, Executive Officer, United Muslim Women Association,
Chair of session on inclusion in interfaith dialogues, Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Leadership and engagement

There are varying levels of engagement in interfaith dialogue at the local level, especially from religious and community leaders.

It is crucial that religious and community leaders are visibly involved in promoting and sustaining interfaith dialogues.

The challenge here is to support religious and community leaders to engage in the interfaith cause.

Awareness and understanding

The key to successful interfaith dialogue is awareness and understanding. Many Australians are not aware of the need for or indeed the meaning of interfaith dialogue.

The challenge is to develop knowledge and understanding around interfaith dialogue in Australia.

> 'There is still a lot of racial discrimination and a lot of divisive media discourses, so there is a sense that the main reason for doing an education programme is to counter prejudice and provide a greater understanding of diversity.
>
> It's important not to just focus on the curriculum but to develop good resources and have really good teacher education programmes. Students need to have the help to develop skills in order to have these more difficult conversations – nonviolent communication skills, active listening skills – to have good dialogue. It's relational, and it takes time.'
>
> Dr Anna Halafoff, Deakin University, Chair of session on interfaith education, Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Role for government

Australia is a legally secular society. Therefore, the very idea of government having a role in religion in Australia is already a grey area, something that needs to be continually negotiated.

The challenge is to find an appropriate role for government in supporting interfaith dialogue at the national level.

'Interfaith dialogue provides an avenue for building trust and friendship, and is a counter to fear and anxiety because it opens up a pathway for the renewal of trust and the deepening of friendship across difference and diversity'.

Right Reverend Dr Stephen Pickard, Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, presentation at the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Ms Esma Yucel and Sr Giovanni Farquer,
at the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Mr Vince Ross and Father Shenouda Boutros,
at the Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Chapter Three: Opportunities for strengthening interfaith dialogue

Although the Australian Government's role in interfaith dialogue is a continual negotiation, the Government's role becomes clearer when viewed through the prism of social cohesion in Australia.

The Council is of the view that interfaith dialogue is a key part of promoting and sustaining social cohesion in Australia.

A successful multicultural society and a strong cohesive nation are essential to our national interest. The Council is of the view that ensuring Australian communities remain cohesive and resilient should be a continuing priority for the Australian Government.

The Council's advice to government on opportunities to support interfaith dialogue in Australia into the future is set out below.

Recommendation 1:

Supporting interfaith networks

There are already many successful interfaith networks and initiatives in Australia. There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to ensure their continued success by making sure they stay fresh, invigorated and current. In recognition of Australia's growing pluralism and diversity, specific steps should be taken to reach out to religious and cultural groups that traditionally may not have been involved in such initiatives. There is also an opportunity for government to support the development of new interfaith networks, and to make interfaith dialogue more inclusive by involving non-faith groups, women and youth.

There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to work with relevant bodies to support interfaith networks through:

- The regular convening of interfaith events and dialogues.
- The development of spaces (e.g. online) for existing networks to share examples of best practice and resources.
- The development of interfaith resources, such as interfaith training for religious leaders, to assist in engaging faith and community leaders and in the development of new networks.

Recommendation 2:

Supporting interfaith education

Interfaith education is about diverse religion, spirituality, and beliefs, and provides an opportunity to promote positive understanding and awareness of the need for interfaith dialogue.

There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to work with relevant agencies/bodies to support interfaith education through:

- Considering the inclusion of interfaith education in the national curriculum.
- Developing interfaith resources to be used for education.

Recommendation 3:

National interfaith representation

National leadership or representation in the interfaith space would unite the interfaith movement in Australia and create stronger leadership.

There is an opportunity for the Australian Government to support national interfaith representation through:

- Supporting a national interfaith body or secretariat, such as the existing Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations.
- Considering an interfaith focus being provided by any future advisory council when advising on diversity and multiculturalism.
- Convening regular national interfaith dialogues.

Appendix

The Australian Multicultural Council

The Australian Multicultural Council (the Council) is a national independent and non-partisan body established in 2011 to provide high level advice to the Australian Government on issues related to multicultural affairs and cultural diversity in Australia.

The Council has nine full members and two *ex officio* members, the Secretary of the Department of Social Services and the Race Discrimination Commissioner.

The Council's terms of reference state that the Council will:

- act as an independent champion of our multicultural nation
- have a formal role in a strengthened access and equity strategy
- have a research advisory role around multicultural policy
- assist with cultural diversity celebrations and Harmony Day activities
- implement a 'multicultural ambassadors' programme to articulate the benefits of and help celebrate our multicultural nation.

The Minister for Social Services, the Hon Kevin Andrews, MP, extended the Council's term to 30 June 2014 and tasked it to continue its exploration into social cohesion, including:

- the potential to improve interfaith and intercultural dialogue
- opportunities to work with local government to foster cohesion and community resilience.

A focus on local government and interfaith dialogue

Following the delivery of the Council's report *The Australian Community* to the Australian Government on 19 December 2013, the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Kevin Andrews, MP, extended the Council's term to 30 June 2014 and tasked it to continue its exploration into social cohesion, including the potential to improve interfaith and intercultural dialogue, and opportunities to work with local government to foster cohesion and community resilience.

Challenges and opportunities to fostering social cohesion

Our 2013 report *The Australian Community* found that initiatives advancing social cohesion are numerous and effective at the local level. We also found that effectiveness of social cohesion strategies, resourcing and funding varied between local areas.

There is a need for greater national leadership, coordination and strategic partnerships. Although there are some social cohesion initiatives at the national level, social cohesion currently lacks a clear and integrated policy framework. This is a significant gap given the array of government and community-funded programmes that aim to foster social cohesion at a national, state and local level.

> Social cohesion efforts in Australia could be described as programme rich; policy and coordination poor.

We see an opportunity for an effective social cohesion framework in Australia. Such a framework would require genuine whole-of-government and whole of community input and engagement; mechanisms to support effective government, community and industry partnerships; and strategies to enhance local leadership and coordination.

> Our 2013 report *The Australian Community* identified three areas to pursue further opportunities for social cohesion through:
>
> - supporting community capabilities
> - developing community structures
> - fostering belonging and trust.

The Council's Interfaith Roundtable

The aim of the Council's Interfaith Roundtable was to discuss how the Australian Government should be involved in interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in Australia.

The Council recently held an Interfaith Roundtable at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre on Thursday 22 May 2014. The theme was 'Interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in Australia: looking to the future', which is also the title of this report.

The roundtable was attended by approximately 60 invited delegates including faith and secular humanist leaders, civil society and government representatives, and interfaith experts.

Council members (seated) and presenters (standing) at the Australian Multicultural Council's Interfaith Roundtable.

Chair of the Council's address to Interfaith Roundtable

As Chair of the Australian Multicultural Council, it is my sincere pleasure to welcome our presenters and esteemed guests to this very important discussion on *Interfaith and social cohesion in Australia: looking to the future*.

Judge Rauf Soulio, Chair,
Australian Multicultural Council.

As part of this important dialogue, I wish to acknowledge the enduring contributions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and acknowledge the traditional owners of the Kulin Nation. The aim of today is to discuss the role that the Australian Government can play in interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in Australia, and we know that your contributions will support our advice to the Government.

The importance of this dialogue is obvious. As has been observed, whenever each religious tradition has honoured the essential and common commandments to love God, and to love our fellow humans as ourselves, it has contributed to humanity's growth and progress. When a religious tradition fails to do so, it has the potential to contribute to conflict within our own society and between its society and that of others.

The Australian Multicultural Council is a national independent and non-partisan body which, since 2011, has provided high level advice to the Australian Government on issues related to multicultural affairs and cultural diversity in Australia.

The Council has nine full members and two *ex officio* members, the Secretary of the Department of Social Services and the Race Discrimination Commissioner.

Since its inception, the Council has had a strong interest in issues of social cohesion and community resilience.

In 2013, Council members met with several community groups across Australia to gain an understanding of the challenges to, and opportunities for, fostering social cohesion in specific locales.

In addition, the Council received briefings from key academics; commissioned a survey of the *People of Australia Ambassador* network; held preliminary discussions with multicultural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives; recommended that the Department of Social Services invest in further social cohesion survey research; and drew from its experience and extensive involvement in communities and public policy.

On the basis of this work, the Council presented to the Minister for Social Services, the Hon Kevin Andrews, MP, and the Parliamentary Secretary assisting the Minister for Social Services, Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, a report titled *The Australian Community* in December 2013.

Subsequent to reading the report, Minister Andrews asked the Council to focus its work through to June 2014, on social cohesion and community resilience, particularly in two areas:

- interfaith and intercultural dialogue
- the potential role of local government.

Today's forum provides a unique opportunity for faith and communities to advise the Council and for you to give your informed views on how the Government can be involved in interfaith dialogue in Australia.

As Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, as he then was, observed: 'Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for the person's point of view, opinion and proposal. To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defences, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth.'

In bringing you together, the Council seeks to not only build our expertise and knowledge, but to also ensure that we can provide very robust advice to the Government which will be significantly informed by your contributions. We welcome you, we thank you, and we wish you well in your endeavours.

(From left to right) Mr Kai Nyborg, Dr Meredith Doig, Professor Des Cahill, OAM, Dr Nicholas Coleman, Dr Natalie Mobini, Mrs Tzipi Boroda, OAM. (Background) Professor Andrew Markus, Mr Ahmet Keskin, Mr Peter Wertheim, AM, Professor Gary Bouma, AM, at Council's Interfaith Roudtable.

Proceedings of the Council's Interfaith Roundtable

The day began with blessings and prayers from national interfaith leaders from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh faiths.

Interfaith Reflections by (from left to right, top to bottom) Bishop Philip Huggins, Rabbi Jeremy Lawrence, Sheikh Isse Musse, Venerable Thich Phuoc Tan, OAM, Mr Gurdarshan Singh Gill, Professor Nihal Agar.

These presentations were followed by smaller discussion sessions chaired by invited experts on six topics of central importance to the theme of interfaith faith and social cohesion:

Topic 1   Interfaith sector and social cohesion

Topic 2   Interfaith and anti-racism

Topic 3   Interfaith education

Topic 4   Inclusion in interfaith dialogue

Topic 5   Awareness and understanding of interfaith dialogue

Topic 6   Government involvement in interfaith dialogue and social cohesion

The smaller discussions were followed by a larger group discussion around opportunities for a national approach to interfaith dialogue and social cohesion. The aim was to discuss how the Government should be involved in interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in Australia.

The day concluded with a summation from Professor Gary Bouma, AM, the UNESCO Chair in Intercultural and Interreligious Relations – Asia Pacific.

The reflections throughout this report, especially in Chapters Two and Three (challenges and opportunities for interfaith and social cohesion) are drawn from the discussions and the expert advice we received at the roundtable.

List of Council members

Judge Rauf Soulio (Chair) (SA), Judge of the District Court of South Australia

Ms Gail Ker, OAM (Deputy Chair) (QLD), CEO, ACCESS Community Services Limited

Ms Yassmin Abdel-Magied (QLD), President, Youth Without Borders

Dr Tanveer Ahmed (NSW), Psychiatrist, Author and Councillor

Dr Hass Dellal, OAM (VIC), Executive Director, Australian Multicultural Foundation

Ms Carmel Guerra (VIC), Chief Executive Officer, Centre for Multicultural Youth

Mr Peter Wertheim, AM (NSW), Executive Director, Executive Council of Australian Jewry

Prof Samina Yasmeen, AM (WA), Director, Centre for Muslim States and Societies and Professor of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Western Australia

Mr Talal Yassine, OAM (NSW), Managing Director Crescent Wealth; Director Australia Post; Professorial Fellow Australian National University

Ex-Officio Members

Mr Finn Pratt, PSM (ACT), Secretary, Department of Social Services

Dr Tim Soutphommasane (NSW), Race Discrimination Commissioner, the Australian Human Rights Commission