

UNESCO - AUSTRALIAUNESCO GENERAL CONFERENCE 1983: REPORT OF THE AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION

The General Conference of UNESCO met in Paris between 25 October to 26 November 1983. The General Conference, which meets in ordinary session every two years, determines the policies and the main lines of work of UNESCO and takes decisions on programmes drawn up by the Board. The Australian Delegation was led by Senator Honourable Susan Ryan, Minister for Education and Youth Affairs and Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women.

Notwithstanding the fact that Australia is a foundation member, this was only the second occasion when a Minister lead an Australian Delegation. Upon her return to attend sittings of Parliament, the delegation was led by His Excellency the Honourable Edward Gough Whitlam QC, the Ambassador and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO, and a former Australian Prime Minister. Other delegates were Professor Ronald Gates, Vice Chancellor University New England and Chairman of the National Committee for UNESCO, the Honourable Justice Michael Kirby CMG and Mr Gratton Wilton, Executive Secretary of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation.

For the first time, the report of the Australian Delegation was tabled in the Australian Parliament. In delivering the report to the Minister, the Ambassador wrote:

Dear Minister,

After you visited Paris to lead the Australian delegation to the 22nd session of Unesco's General Conference, you decided to table a report from the delegation in Parliament. I now have the pleasure of delivering it to you.

The delegates who attended the Commissions of the Conference were predominantly responsible for preparing the reports on the Commissions. The other sectors of the report were prepared by the permanent delegation.

Since this is the first time that a delegation's report is to be tabled, it includes some constitutional, historical and statistical material which is not readily available.

A month after the session ended, the United States of America gave notice to the Director-General that it would withdraw from Unesco. This notice will take effect on 31 December 1984. It was not recommended by the US delegation to the session. It was given despite clear indications of a reduction throughout the session in the degree of politicisation and ideological confrontation in Unesco's proceedings. The USA has always been by far the largest contributor to Unesco funds and, no less importantly, the wealth and variety of its intellectual resources make it the largest contributor to Unesco's activities and objectives. Even if it returns, its absence will leave Unesco permanently weakened as its three-year withdrawal from ILO has permanently weakened that companion component of the UN system. There are signs that the United Kingdom, another founding member and in the early years the second most important member, Because of the increasing tensions in the world the purposes of Unesco are as important today as they were when the Organization was founded. Wars still begin in the minds of men and women. Like all truly international institutions Unesco has greatly changed in membership and outlook since it was founded. It must be a microcosm of the world as it is. In reporting to the Parliament on the 1983 session the delegation cannot appropriately analyse the ideological divergence between the political parties of the Right and Left in the Western democracies on the question of multilateral organisations and conventions. It is proper for it, however, to affirm its conviction that Australia's duty is to stay firmly in Unesco, as a critic where the Organization is seen to be inefficient or misguided but always as a positive participant. If the brave idea of Unesco failed, the world would be a more dangerous place.

Yours sincerely,



The report is a useful and interesting document. In the following pages, we publish the text of the Minister's speech which indicates the Australian Government's policy to UNESCO. Having regard to Australia's increasing attachment to her neighbouring region, that part of the report entitled "Australia's Appropriate Group" is pertinent. In the context of the current controversy over UNESCO, reference may be made to that part of the report relating to the Budget. The following programmes would be of interest to international lawyers:

Programme X9- Environmental Education and Information,  
 Major Programme III - Communication in the Service of Man, which deals with the next question of a New World information and communication order,  
 Major Programme XI Culture and the Future,  
 Programme XII.2 The Elimination of Prejudice, Intolerance; Racism and Apartheid,  
 Major Programme XIII, Peace, International Understanding, Human Rights and the Rights of People.

Finally, we draw attention that part of the report relating to the election of committees and a useful addendum concerning UNESCO Conventions and Australian actions thereunder.

### Annexure A Minister's speech

I join the previous speakers in congratulating you, Mr President, on your election. I would also like to express a warm welcome to those new Member States and the new Associate Members who have joined the Organization since the last session of the General Conference. Their action in joining Unesco gives our Organization a universality of membership to match the universality of its charter.

Mr President, I would like to begin by drawing your attention to the concluding words of the Director-General's introduction to the draft program and budget. Here he speaks of upholding the rights of each and every person in the world to equity, justice and peace. In reaching out for this ideal, the Organization strikes a full chord of sympathy from the Australian Government. As part of the policy statement on which my Government was elected, we affirmed our commitment to contribute to the creation of a just, equitable and humane international society.

This aim has been dear to the Australian people for many years. Indeed, Australia was a foundation member of Unesco. The present Australian Government is the successor of the Labor Government which appointed Australia's first full-time Ambassador to Unesco. A Minister in that Government was the only Australian Minister before me to address the General Conference.

To demonstrate our commitment to the work of Unesco, my Government since its election in March this year has moved quickly to a more active role in the work of this Organization. One of our decisions as a Government was to appoint a most distinguished Australian as Ambassador and Permanent Delegate. Mr Gough Whitlam, a former Labor Prime Minister of Australia, will be known to many of you because of his long involvement nationally and internationally in issues with which Unesco is concerned. His expert and energetic leadership, together with a strengthened staff, will mean an increased contribution by Australia to the work here in Paris.

One of the contributions which the Organization can make to the achievement of the purposes for which it was founded is through its standard setting instruments. Some distinguished delegates, Mr President, may be aware of the way in which the Australian Government recently acted to ensure that the words and spirit of the World Heritage Convention were acknowledged within Australia. In April this year, on the first day that the new Parliament met, the Government introduced a World Heritage Properties Conservation Act. On the first of July 1983, the High Court of Australia gave judgment on a challenge against this legislation and found that through its being a signatory to the World Heritage Convention the Australian Government had powers to prevent the construction of a proposed dam in the South-West Tasmania wilderness area. This wilderness area, which contains one of the few remaining temperate rain forests in the world, is listed on the World Heritage List. It has now been saved. Our Government has further demonstrated its commitment to the principles of the World Heritage Convention by declaring the second stage of the Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory and by declaring the Great Barrier Reef a marine park.

Turning to the peace objective of Unesco, it should be noted that our Government has appointed Australia's first Ambassador for Disarmament and has taken steps to establish a peace research institute in Australia. I have also initiated a national peace curriculum

program for Australian schools. In another area of concern to Unesco, major government policy for which I am responsible is comprehensive legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sex and marital status in a wide range of areas. As our environment legislation gained force by our participation in the World Heritage Convention, so our sex discrimination legislation implements our responsibilities following our Government's ratification of the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. One of the fundamental areas in which discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status will be prohibited is that of education.

When the legislation is enacted, which will happen shortly after my return to Australia, all federal-funded education programs will be required to be equally accessible to girls as to boys. Equal access will also be required for female students in tertiary institutions and the legislation will prohibit discriminatory employment practices in universities and other tertiary institutions. These measures will ensure Australia's compliance with the Unesco objective of improving educational opportunities for women.

In the few days in which I have been absent from Australia, our Government has announced its intention to introduce a Bill of Rights for Australians, together with other human rights legislation. The Bill of Rights will deal with basic rights such as freedom of expression, conscience, religion and protection of privacy. It will also protect against the restrictions of such rights by written laws and government action.

The human rights package will also include a strengthening of the Racial Discrimination Act, which provides protection against discrimination on the grounds of race for the many racial groups that now make up multicultural Australia and, in particular, for the indigenous people of Australia, the Australian Aborigines, whose grossly disadvantaged position in Australian society will be energetically addressed by our Government.

The Government has been seeking ways to ensure that national actions and policies closely reflect the norms and agreements to which Member States of Unesco have subscribed at earlier sessions of the General Conference. It now gives me pride and pleasure to announce that the Government proposes to become a party to the following Unesco Conventions:

- the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict;
- the Convention on the International Exchange of Publications;
- the Convention on the Exchange of Official Publications and Government Documents between States; and
- the Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property.

In respect at least of the last Convention, delegates will appreciate that administrative machinery and legislation may be required prior to accession. My Government is actively considering these requirements.

Unesco is unique among the specialised agencies of the United Nations in the breadth of its areas of competence. Thus, it has a unique opportunity to approach world problems in an interdisciplinary fashion. We welcome the interdisciplinary presentation of the new draft program and we hope that its implementation will involve a matching administrative response. It is in the science programs that the value of an interdisciplinary approach can be most clearly seen. Scientific advances so often develop in separate scientific compartments. We can understand some of the divisions which are evident in Major Program X, but we urge Unesco to break down the dividing walls between scientific disciplines and, further, to give special attention to the impact of scientific advances on social and cultural issues. Major Program VI offers special possibilities for this approach.

4.

Mr President, we appreciate the difficulty the Director-General faces in pursuing the ideals of equity, justice and peace for all people in a world in which so much is expected of the United Nations and its specialised agencies and in which any shortcomings become a target for criticism. Too often, support for idealism is quickly withdrawn in a time of economic recession such as we have now. However, because the economic problems of each of us is related to our collective problems, the only effective solutions to these problems will be solutions that are collectively formulated and implemented in a co-operative manner. The economic recession makes the work of Unesco even more urgent and relevant than it was in more prosperous times.

Mr President, Unesco was established to contribute to peace and international understanding through intellectual co-operation. We believe that this fundamental purpose can best be served through co-operative, practical action. We Australians are a practical people. We like to think we are tolerant; we like to think we are co-operative; we want to support an organisation whose commitment to practical action can be realised despite the pressing political problems which absorb so many of its members. It is involvement with effective programs which in the long run will sustain the support of Member States.

In this context Australia is particularly mindful of the serious political, social and economic strains confronting many of its developing country partners. Unesco can play an important role by ensuring that its operational programs are focused on the practical needs of its member countries.

In the same way we want Unesco to be seen to be an organisation primarily concerned with action rather than, to use the present vocabulary, reflection. I am not advocating all of one approach and nothing of the other, for we are fully conscious of the need for all actions to be based on a firm and proper understanding of the problem. We similarly understand that often it will be necessary for Unesco to mount its own basic research programs. We support such work provided there is a demonstrated link between the research and proposed program actions, and provided that the research is directed to the causes, rather than the symptoms, of the world problems which properly fall within Unesco's areas of concern.

Our concern for practical, action-oriented research will be reflected domestically as well. I intend to review the work of the Australian National Commission for Unesco to ensure that projects supported by it fulfil the requirements we are asking of Unesco itself.

Mr President, I have supported the Director-General's emphasis on equity, justice and peace and I have referred to the importance of the practical elements in Unesco's programs. With this in mind I would like to compliment the Director-General particularly on the general thrust of the proposals in the field of education. As Minister for Education I have a particular interest in many of the activities proposed in Major Program II, 'Education for All'. My Government's commitment to action in this field within Australia is reflected in its new Participation and Equity Program.

This program is aimed at reform in secondary schooling. The need for such reform is clearly demonstrated by the low participation rates of Australian students in the later years of secondary schooling. Despite our relative affluence and the universal provision of secondary schooling, only one-third of our young people complete a full six years of secondary education. This figure is far too low and compares unfavourably with other OECD countries. It is particularly unacceptable to our Government because it is the children of poor families, of some migrant groups and of Aborigines who are failing to complete secondary school and are thus, at a time of high unemployment, seriously disadvantaged compared to middle class children who generally do complete their secondary schooling. The changes that we plan through the Participation and Equity Program will include changes to curriculum and changes to school organisation, so that all children regardless of their ethnic or cultural background or gender, will find appropriate and engaging education or training for six secondary years.

Mr President, the Director-General has an unenviable task in administering programs in a community of 160 Member States so diverse in their history, their culture, their needs and their hopes for the future. There are some aspects of Unesco's endeavours in which we feel there is more to be gained from regional action to bring together countries with common concerns. We therefore give strong support for actions designed to bring about a shift in the administration of the Organization from the present concentration here in Paris to places much closer to the scene of the program delivery. In the years between conferences we have noted some change and indeed we are strongly supportive of the way in which the Regional Office in Bangkok is structured and administered. Within the area of the Pacific we welcome the proposal to establish a small presence in one of the Pacific Member States. It is only a beginning, however. A more concerted effort, indeed a strong policy commitment, must be made to bring about a further change. We therefore wish to compliment the Director-General on the decentralisation proposals which he has outlined in his introduction to the draft program and budget. We fully support his proposals to make such administrative changes, or changes to regulations, in order to speed up the process.

One of the areas of endeavour in which regional action is especially effective is education. In this field we commend the co-operative action and the sharing of experience among the nations of the Asia and Pacific region, especially through the Asian Program of Educational Innovation for Development and through the new Regional Co-operative Program in Higher Education.

With New Zealand we became a member of the Asia-Pacific region for program purposes at the 18th Session of the General Conference and our association with our neighbours in that context has encouraged us both to seek membership of the region also for electoral purposes. Distinguished delegates will be aware of the Constitutional amendment which has been submitted by Australia and New Zealand. That amendment, Mr President, seeks to do three things:

- first, it seeks the approval of the General Conference for the transfer of Australia and New Zealand from Electoral Group I to Electoral Group IV;
- secondly, and to take account of the move from Group I to Group IV, the approval of the General Conference is sought to increase the size of the Executive Board by one seat; and
- finally, the approval of the General Conference is sought to allocate the additional Executive Board seat so created to Group IV.

Our reasons for seeking the agreement of the General Conference to the above action are outlined in the statement attached to the agenda paper. I will not repeat that explanation. I hope that distinguished delegates will be able to understand our position and, at the appropriate time, to support our proposal.

Mr President, I wish to conclude this address by reaffirming the commitment of the Australian Government to the work of Unesco. In the coming weeks my delegation will be seeking to play a positive and constructive role in the debates and discussions of this Conference. Our approach will follow the broad principles which I have outlined in this address. There will be occasions on which we may express views quite different from those expressed by others. We do not see that the expression of such differences should be regarded as a weakness of the Organization: on the contrary, they should be seen as one of its strengths, for they represent a dialogue between people separated by many factors of geography, history and economic development. Such a dialogue, of course, involves tolerance towards others — their views, cultures and aspirations; where there is tolerance, there is the true spirit of international co-operation.