

CRITICISM OF THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO UNCROC

Justice Alastair Nicholson, AO RFD, Chief Justice of the Family Court at
The 1996 Sir Ronald Wilson Lecture, Perth, 13 Nov 1996

Even the most basic and general of Convention obligations have been poorly met by Australian governments. Relatively little has been done by governments to fulfil the Convention expectation in Article 42, that the contents of UNCROC will be made widely known. Our first formal report to the UN was 3 years past its due date. Moreover the formal report is an unweildy report which is more descriptive than it is analytical or reflective about lack of compliance. This should not be surprising I suppose, because as far as I am aware Australia's formal report was produced by government representatives alone, in isolation from the community and most inappropriate of all, without any input from children and young people themselves.

I share the serious concerns expressed in the excellent "Alternative" report which has been prepared by the Australian Section of Defence for Children International, following a consultation process with community organisations and young people's groups.

That this Alternative Report is considered by the UN expert monitoring committee is, in my view, very important. Unlike Australia's formal report, The Alternative Report details the many and varied areas where a claim of Australian compliance seems hollow and lends further weight to the importance of developing a national agenda for children which ties governments to measurable and resourced implementation of targets.

THE INTERNATIONAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Helen Bayes, National Convenor

Twenty-nine DCI Sections met in the bustling city of Dakar, the Paris of West Africa, where superb patisseries compete with street vendors and beggars for the tourist dollar. January is the best time of year in Dakar - warm clear days, cool nights, no mosquitoes. It was also Ramadan and the mosques rang with male voices in harmonic prayer, early and late.

DCI international gatherings have three working languages, English, French and Spanish. Professional interpreters, volunteering their time, take turns to keep everyone involved in the discussions. Inevitably the meetings go on beyond their allotted time, the interpreters take a well-deserved break and multi-lingual members of DCI take over, speaking each language in turn. One night, Ricardo, the Secretary-General was so tired he caught himself translating English into English, and I found myself marvelling at how good he was!

The IGA adopted a three-year strategy for the global movement, amended the statutes and elected a new International Executive Council. Your representative, was elected by 28 votes out of 29, to represent the North America-Australasia Sections. Since there are only two, Canada and Australia, this

will not be very onerous. The greater challenge in the role is to support the development of more sections in the region. I am hoping that interested New Zealanders will soon create a section there, and that the dormant USA Section can be revived. IGAs are always held after a DCI conference to make them financially viable, and this IGA followed an African Seminar on Children in Conflict with the Law. In many countries of Africa, children are arrested, tried and punished as if they are adults, some children serving long sentences in adult jails. Vulnerable to rape and torture, deprived of family contact and education, their childhood is truly wrenched from them.

The next triennial Conference and IGA will be in Sri Lanka, in 2000. Start saving now - everyone can go, though each section has only one vote. There is nothing like a DCI world gathering to inspire you to work even harder for children's rights!

