

Foreign Policy White Paper Submission

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To whom it may concern,

Submission re Foreign Policy White Paper

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to inform the Australian Government's development of its Foreign Policy White Paper.

This is a personal submission, prompted by the four-page Call for Submissions, published on the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website <http://dfat.gov.au/whitepaper/submissions/make-a-submission/index.html>.

In this submission, I will address four main issues that I believe must be addressed in any responsible Foreign Policy White Paper: climate change; refugees; foreign aid; and human rights.

Which is why it was so disappointing to note that three of these four issues were not mentioned, *at all*, in that four-page document.

There was not even a single mention of the threat posed by global warming, the humanitarian challenge of the growth in displaced persons and people seeking asylum, or the need to promote the human rights of all people, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people, around the world.

Admittedly, there was at least one cursory reference to "our overseas development assistance program", although, as we shall see below, even that was inadequate.

In any event, please see below my explanation of why each of these four policy areas must form a central part of the Foreign Policy White Paper that is expected to be released in late 2017.

1. Climate Change & Global Warming

I find it extraordinary that the White Paper call for submissions completely failed to mentionⁱ what must be the most important challenge facing the world in the 21st century: climate change, and specifically accelerating global warming.

In 2017, there is no doubt that the actions of humans have contributed to a rapidly warming planet. Indeed, the Government's own Bureau of Meteorology confirmed, in its most recent *Annual Climate Statement*ⁱⁱ, that:

- 2016 was Australia's fourth warmest year on record, 0.87 degrees above the long-term average

- It was also the warmest year on record for ocean temperatures in the Australian region, with an annual mean sea surface temperature 0.73 degrees above average, and
- Our three most populous states, NSW, Victoria and Queensland, also had the highest average minimum temperatures on record during the past 12 months.

Globally, the news is even more confronting. The same report confirmed that:

- 2016 was the warmest year on record around the world, 0.83 degrees above the long-term average
- “This surpasses the previous record set in 2015, and is **the third year running that the new record has been set**” [emphasis added]
- January, February, March, April, July, August and December 2016 were *all* the warmest respective months on record, and
- “The global ocean surface temperature for the calendar year was also the warmest on record in 2016, surpassing the record set in 2015.”

This is nothing short of a climate emergency. And it is a situation that will directly affect Australia, and its people, just as it affects every other country and people in the world (after all, if the planet cooks, we will all cook with it).

The threat of climate change is an international problem – consequently, the response to it must be international in nature too. That includes a response from Australia, both through domestic policy (with the introduction of an effective price on carbon), but also in its foreign policy settings.

Climate change generally, and global warming specifically, may well be the most significant challenge we, as a species, have ever faced. I believe responding to this threat must be the number one priority of any new Foreign Policy White Paper that the Australian Government produces.

2. Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

A second issue that, almost as bizarrely, is not even mentioned in the Foreign Policy White Paper call for submissions is the growing number of displaced people around the world, including refugees and people seeking asylum.

This is despite the fact that the most recent *Global Trends: Forced Displacement* report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)ⁱⁱⁱ noted that “[g]lobal forced displacement has increased in 2015, with record-high numbers.”

Indeed, that same report revealed there were:

- 65.3 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, including
 - 21.3 million refugees
 - 40.8 million internally displaced persons, and
 - 3.2 million asylum seekers

- 12.4 million people newly displaced due to conflict or persecution in 2015 alone, and
- 2.0 million asylum applications submitted (a new record-high) with 441,900 asylum claims just in Germany as a result of the war in Syria.

It should not have taken widely-shared, tragic photographs of Alan Kurdi in September 2015 to make us realise this is truly a global humanitarian crisis.

The numbers alone confirm that this is an international issue of the highest order, and addressing its causes, while responding to the consequences, must be a foreign policy priority for all countries, including Australia.

One of the many depressing statistics found in the UNHRC's report confirms that it currently is not: "[d]uring 2015, the total number of refugees admitted for resettlement stood at 107,100"^{iv}. That's 107,100 out of a total of 21.3 million.

Of course, the Australian Government may claim that, given 9,400 of those refugees were resettled here (the third-highest of any country), we do not need to do more.

But that ignores the fact we benefit from our location, and *isolation*, and therefore do not have the same number of in-country applications for asylum as other places. And it also overlooks the wealth and privilege we currently enjoy.

As a country we can, and must, do more in response to the growing number of displaced persons around the world, and that should be reflected in our new Foreign Policy White Paper.

3. Foreign Aid

The one issue, out of the four priority areas highlighted above, that is at least touched on in the call for submissions is foreign aid. *Topic 5: Australia confronts a range of strategic, security and transnational challenges* on page 3 includes the following question:

"How can our foreign policy, including our overseas development assistance program, support a more prosperous, peaceful and stable region?"

However, while this question at least acknowledges the importance of foreign aid (or in this case 'overseas development assistance'), it does so largely within the framework of Australia's national interest, rather than in the context of our common humanity.

Irrespective of this broader 'framing', one of the main answers to this question is actually to increase our foreign aid spending.

Drastic budget cuts to Australia's foreign aid budget in recent years – with \$1 billion, or 20%, cut in 2015-16, and a further \$224 million reduction in 2016-17

– have seen foreign aid as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fall to an estimated 0.23%^v.

Indeed, “[b]etween 2012 and 2016, Australia’s foreign aid as a share of national income has fallen steeply from 0.36% to 0.23%.”^{vi}

This leaves our foreign aid allocation at less than half the previous bipartisan goal of reaching 0.5% of GDP by 2015.

And, significantly, *it is less than one third of the United Nations target* that countries provide at least 0.7% of their national income as foreign aid.

The cuts to foreign aid have the potential to cause real and lasting damage across our region, and around the world, to countries and people that can least afford it.

As a result, I believe that the Foreign Policy White Paper should feature both a recommitment to the United Nations target, as well as a de-coupling of our foreign aid budget from an almost-exclusive focus on Australia’s national interest.

If we fail to do either, then we are at grave risk of changing from the land of ‘the fair go’ to the country of ‘what’s in it for us?’

4. Human rights, including LGBTI rights

There is one final issue that is completely omitted from the four-page Call for Submissions regarding the Foreign Policy White Paper: international human rights.

As a long-term LGBTI advocate and activist, I would like to focus on one specific sub-set of international human rights – the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people around the world.

In June 2016, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) estimated that same-sex sexual acts were illegal in 72 states, or a full 37% of United Nations members^{vii}. This includes 13 States (or part thereof) where same-sex sexual acts attract the death penalty.

The criminalisation of homosexuality is also a particular problem in our own region of Oceania, with prohibitions in our nearest neighbour Papua New Guinea, as well as Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Tuvalu (plus Cook Islands who are associates to New Zealand).

There are an additional four countries in South-East Asia where same-sex acts remain illegal (Brunei Darussalam, parts of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore).

Long-standing LGBTI advocate Peter Tatchell last week actually stated that “[t]here remain 75 countries and dependent territories that still criminalise

same-sex relations – with nearly half of these jurisdictions outlawing both male and female homosexuality”.^{viii}

And, in a specific challenge to countries like the United Kingdom and Australia, he observed that “[h]omosexuality remains criminalised in 36 out of the 52 Commonwealth member states” where “[m]ost of these anti-gay laws were imposed by Britain during the colonial era.”^{ix}

The ongoing criminalisation of people on the basis of their sexual orientation, as well as other anti-LGBTI human rights abuses such as the involuntary sterilisation of intersex infants and the failure to recognise and accept trans and gender diverse people, is a major problem in the early 21st century.

I believe Australia should adopt a pro-active role in supporting groups that are working to address these human rights violations, both in our region (where, as we have seen above, there is plenty of work still to do) and around the world.

We should also seek, wherever possible, to progress the positive recognition and acceptance of LGBTI human rights in international forums, including the United Nations as well as other groups such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).

Finally, both of these activities – support for the work of LGBTI rights organisations in our region and globally, as well as the pursuit of LGBTI human rights internationally – should be reflected in the Foreign Policy White Paper.

Obviously, in each of the four issues outlined in this submission – climate change, refugees, foreign aid and LGBTI rights – the Australian Government can be legitimately criticised for not doing enough to achieve progress domestically.

We can and must do better in terms of reducing our own carbon emissions, of adopting a more humane approach to refugees and people seeking asylum, of increasing our foreign aid budget and of respecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex Australians.

But, at the same time as addressing these ourselves, I believe we can – and above all must – help to achieve progress on these issues globally, because the rise of global warming, the growth in the number of displaced persons, the unmet need for foreign aid, and discrimination against LGBTI people, are problems that transcend state borders.

Which means the solutions cross state borders too – and that therefore Australia has a role to play in fixing them.

Thank you in advance for taking this submission into account as the Australian Government develops its Foreign Policy White Paper.

Please do not hesitate to contact me, at the details provided, should you require additional information.

Sincerely,

Alastair Lawrie

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Footnotes:

ⁱ Question 2, on page 3 of the call for submissions, refers to ‘environmental degradation’, a phrase that is so vague it can be interpreted in multiple ways, and does not begin to capture the urgency of the climate emergency we currently face.

ⁱⁱ Bureau of Meteorology *Annual Climate Statement 2016*.

<http://www.bom.gov.au/climate/current/annual/aus/>

ⁱⁱⁱ UNHRC, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement* in 2015.

<http://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf>

^{iv} Ibid, page 26.

^v The Conversation, *Savage budget cuts pull Australia down in foreign aid rankings*, May 4, 2016. <https://theconversation.com/savage-budget-cuts-pull-australia-down-in-foreign-aid-rankings-58854>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} See ILGA, *State-Sponsored Homophobia 2016* report here.

http://ilga.org/downloads/02_ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2016_ENG_WEB_150516.pdf

^{viii} Guardian, *There are reasons to be cheerful... LGBTI rights gains in unlikely countries*, February 20, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2017/feb/20/lgbti-rights-gains-unlikely-countries>

^{ix} Ibid.