

Senate, Wednesday 19 September 2001

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Joint: Report

Senator PAYNE (New South Wales) (5.39 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I present the report of the committee entitled *The link between aid and human rights*, together with the *Hansard* record of the committee's proceedings and submissions received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Senator PAYNE —I seek leave to move a motion in relation to the report.

Leave granted.

Senator PAYNE —I move:

That the Senate take note of the report.

In the 39th Parliament, the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has examined three significant issues. The report that I have just tabled is the result of the third of those examinations. We, firstly, investigated freedom of religion and belief, tabled in November of last year; and, secondly, examined conditions in immigration detention centres, tabled in June of this year. My former colleague the late Peter Nugent was the chair of the subcommittee until a very late stage of the latter report and ensured that that third topic, the link between aid and human rights, did not lapse. Thus, in this last report with which he was involved the committee again wishes to pay tribute to his memory and to the contribution that he made to the work of this parliament.

This inquiry had very narrow and specific terms of reference asking us to focus on Australia's efforts to advance human rights in developing nations through the use of foreign aid in three specific areas: firstly, activities that have the advancement of human rights as their goal; secondly, the utility of differing instruments and channels for advancing those rights; and, thirdly, activities supported under the human rights program in the overall Australian aid program. The inquiry received 31 submissions from a variety of government and non-government organisations and from two individuals. We were conscious that the terms of reference were restricted and that there were limitations on the time to complete the inquiry, because we did wish to table the report in this parliament.

Consequently, we did not hold a full program of public hearings but, rather, held a seminar on 5 July 2001 at which selected organisations were asked to participate. Because we did not undertake the formal hearing process, the committee believed that it was not appropriate to make formal recommendations to government. But the seminar did in fact provide a cross-section of interests and views, and I think that everybody who was involved thought it was a successful means of exchanging ideas on the topic. In fact, I would describe it as both productive and positive and, in the context of discussions between government and NGOs in the aid area, as reasonably forthright, as they often are. I am sure that the parliamentary secretary responsible for aid, who is in the chamber at the moment, would agree with my observation. At the seminar there was considerable discussion of a rights based approach to aid. Although we did not reach a final conclusion about whether the poverty alleviation and sustainable development approach put forward by AusAID should be replaced by the rights based approach favoured by NGOs, we did indeed explore that in a very comprehensive fashion.

The report notes that the subcommittee drew a number of conclusions from its examination of the topic. I will briefly list those. The subcommittee said, firstly, that AusAID should make additional efforts to ensure that its documentation is complete and easily available to those who are interested in its work; secondly, that there should be the convening by AusAID of seminars with Australian non-government organisations to discuss subjects of common

interest, including specific linkages of aid and human rights; thirdly, that there should be serious consideration by the government of the cancellation of the debts of seriously indebted nations; penultimately, that there should be an international conference on the heavily indebted poor countries initiative, the HIPC initiative, to review the process of admission to that initiative; and, finally, that there should be continuation by AusAID of at least the current financial support to the Asia Pacific Forum of Human Rights Institutions, the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The committee does believe that these conclusions would assist the debate on Australia's aid program. In particular, convening a program of seminars would formalise contact between AusAID and the NGOs with an interest in the aid program.

I take this opportunity to thank all of my colleagues on the subcommittee for their assistance during my time as chair following Peter Nugent's untimely death and particularly in the preparation of this report. I also thank the then secretary to the committee, Patrick Regan, who retired just last week after in excess of a decade's work in the parliament on the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. It is important that his contribution is placed on the record. I commend the report to the Senate.

Question resolved in the affirmative.