

Additional comments by Australian Democrats

Senator Stott Despoja

The Democrats agree with the evidence presented in the Chair's report.

We share the concerns raised and endorse the recommendations contained therein, particularly in relation to human rights and labour standards.

Although we acknowledge the committee has placed a reasonable emphasis on such issues, we would like to highlight further the continued violations of labour standards and human rights in China and draw attention to Australia's obligations to ensure that trade is conducted in a way that is in accord with Australian values and international human rights conventions. Australia must ensure that economic considerations do not outweigh human rights considerations.

We note Amnesty International's 2005 Annual Report that stated:

There was progress towards reform in some areas, but this failed to have a significant impact on serious and widespread human rights violations perpetrated across the country. Tens of thousands of people continued to be detained or imprisoned in violation of their fundamental human rights and were at high risk of torture or ill-treatment. Thousands of people were sentenced to death or executed, many after unfair trials. Public protests increased against forcible evictions and land requisition without adequate compensation. China continued to use the global "war on terrorism" to justify its crackdown on the Uighur community in Xinjiang. Freedom of expression and religion continued to be severely restricted in Tibet and other Tibetan areas of China.

The Australian Democrats acknowledge differences in culture and political systems between Australian and China, but reject arguments that this somehow justifies inaction or silence on human rights abuses and dismal labour standards in China.

We also note concerns raised during the inquiry, and noted by the committee, in relation to the numerous allegations made of intimidation, surveillance and suppression of groups and individuals within Australia by the Chinese Government, in particular, but not limited to, practitioners of Falun Gong. We reaffirm our position that such activity by a foreign Government within Australia is totally unacceptable.

We agree with comments made by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, among others, in relation to guidelines on multinational enterprises. There is far more room for a debate on the appropriate application of a corporate code of conduct for Australian businesses operating overseas. While we acknowledge the committee's recommendation on this issue and the difficulties involved with such an endeavour, we urge governments, NGOs and businesses to work toward the formulation of formal guidelines for Australian corporations operating overseas.

We also note the importance of Taiwan to Australia's national interests and again urge the Australian Government to allow high-ranking Taiwanese officials transit stops in Australia, and to recommence Australian ministerial visits to Taiwan.

SENATOR STOTT DESPOJA
AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS