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**General Debate: Contribution by the Hon Tony Smith MP**

Speaker of the House of Representatives

Leader of the Australian Delegation

***Human rights abuses as precursors of conflict: Parliaments as early responders***

Mr President, Mr Secretary-General, parliamentary colleagues

Human rights are fundamental to Australian society and as the leader of the Australian delegation it is a great honour to address you on this topic.

Australia is considered to be one of the younger nation states here today. We may be young, but from our inception we have believed that human rights are fundamental for peaceful democracies.

As parliamentarians we understand the electoral process is a key component of human rights. Citizens use this democratic tool to send us, as their representatives, to our respective parliaments.

In 1902, Australia led the world in giving women the right to vote in federal elections **and** the right to stand for parliament. We were in good company with our close friends New Zealand who were the first to grant women the right to vote in 1893. Australians – men and women - have embraced this right for over 100 years.

More than a century later, Australia is building on this story as we pursue our candidature for the UN Human Rights Council in 2018.

No country is perfect, but Australia has a proud history of promoting and protecting human rights.

We are a founding member of the UN and remain a strong advocate for the UN Charter - which at its heart is about human rights.

We are working to extend the democratic franchise, improve educational and employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians, and promote good governance and a strong civil society in our region.

Australia is home to one of the oldest continuous civilisations, and we are proud of the culture and heritage of Australia's First Peoples. In the last two parliaments, there has been increased indigenous representation in both houses of parliament, including for those in executive positions.

Another perspective that Australia brings is the necessity of gender equality to realise the full potential of women, men, girls and boys. Since 2011, Australia's Ambassador for Women and Girls has worked to ensure the empowerment of women and girls is a central focus of Australia's diplomatic efforts.

Colleagues, as parliamentarians we know that good governance, the rule of law, and strong public institutions are essential for democracy. In Australia we believe women must be equal partners in the democratic process. Australia is proud to work alongside our Pacific neighbours to improve how gender equality is addressed by Parliaments in our region, including through inter-parliamentary study programs, seminars, training support and in particular support for the Pacific Women's Parliamentary Partnership.

As I speak to you in this debate, I reflect on the importance of promoting and protecting freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is a fundamental part of a vibrant democracy and culture of accountability. Protecting the core human right to freedom of expression is not just an aspirational goal; but something Australia promotes through practical assistance and advocacy. We have long argued for the universal abolition of slavery and the death penalty and are committed to supporting the rights of people with a disability, combatting homophobia and addressing violence against women and girls.

This is not just a series of aspirational targets, but deeply held beliefs of the Australian community. This is demonstrated by our overseas aid program, the work of our parliament, and the engagement by our citizens of both professional and volunteer services at home and abroad.

Another important way that Australia demonstrates its commitment to the universal principles of human rights is through the scrutiny of legislation by the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights. This committee ensures that all legislation that is put before the parliament is assessed for compatibility with international human rights standards.

Human rights are fundamental to our shared existence. They reflect the idea that each person has inherent value simply by virtue of existing. Respect for these rights is essential to peace. Where human rights are neglected, the connections that bind us together break down. As parliamentarians we have special role to play as early responders in protecting human rights.

For over 100 years Australia has advocated for human rights, now universally contained within the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.

Australia's candidature for the Human Rights Council in 2018 is a natural progression of our support for these principles and our willingness to step up. This reflects how we have always engaged with the international community – with active, practical advocacy, sensitivity and fairness and a willingness to speak out against human rights violations and abuses.

It is an honour to meet with you here this week. Australia continues to value the exchange of views and partnerships we forge through the IPU.

Thank you