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Bid for UN Human Rights Council a Great Opportunity to Better Australia's Record on Rights

Leading human rights lawyers from Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) today commented that Australia's bid for a position on the UN Human Rights Council presents a compelling opportunity for Australia to re-emerge from global human rights lagger to re-assume our position as a worldwide leader on human rights. Without a recommitment domestically, the disconnect between Australia's aspirations for a seat on the Council and its domestic score-card on human rights will mean that Australia risks being viewed in many corners of the international community as insincere and an outlier that cannot speak with the authority necessary to build the credibility of the Council.

ALHR Spokesperson Benedict Coyne today stated: "Australia was once proudly at the forefront of promoting and progressing the international modern human rights era in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust. Australia was directly involved in drafting the *1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *1951 International Refugee Convention*. We are a nation that has historically prided itself on, and forged our national identity around, giving everyone a fair go and engaging the altruistic virtues of mateship in its many forms. Unfortunately, we have significantly stumbled down a slippery slope to sleep at the watch on human rights in recent years, including especially in relation to serious mistreatment of indigenous people, asylum seekers, women and children. However, this is no reason why Australia cannot redeem itself by taking the basic necessary steps to improve its national human rights record and standing in the eyes of the international community.

Mr Coyne continued: "As much as Australians regard our country as a community in which individuality, freedom and dignity are allowed to flourish, unfortunately there is significant mythology in such perception. The fact is that Australia is the only liberal democracy and common law legal system without a constitutional bill of rights or legislated Human Rights Act at the national level. While Australia has signed and ratified the core international human rights treaties, we have failed to honour our binding legal obligations to the international community by properly enacting laws in Australia protecting the basic human rights building blocks of our way of life.

Mr Coyne clarified: "In January 2011 Australia suffered much condemnation from the international community before the UN Human Rights Council at our first Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the world cup of human rights. Fifty-four countries made 145 recommendations for Australia to improve its human rights record and over 90% of these remain outstanding. Countries including Sweden, France, Jordan, Argentina, Timor-Leste, Canada, Ukraine, the Russian Federation and Norway made specific recommendations that Australia properly implement its outstanding international obligations by legislating a federal human rights act. Australia's second UPR is scheduled for 9 November 2015 at which it is expected Foreign Minister Julie Bishop will attend to address the international community's concerns about Australia's human rights record and failure to implement the majority of recommendations from its first UPR.

Mr Coyne concluded: “Australia has a proud tradition of protecting and promoting human rights and contributing to their strengthening in other countries, however, we believe more can be done and must be done in areas including refugee rights, indigenous rights and disability rights. We hope that greater engagement with the UN system will lead to a greater understanding of the need for stronger protections in this country including the need for a federal Human Rights Act. Australia is the only country that we would regard as fully democratic which does not have legislation to ensure that the human rights that we have promised to respect and protect are indeed taken into account in every government action. We should protect our way of life by legally protecting our human rights. Our democracy will not be impaired. It will be strengthened.

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ALHR (Australian Lawyers for Human Rights) is a network of Australian lawyers active in practising and promoting awareness of international human rights standards in Australia. ALHR has a national membership of over 2,600 people, with active National, State and Territory committees.