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Media release

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Human Rights Day theme ‘Recover Better’ reminds us Australia can do much better.

Australia was integral to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Now we are the only Western Democracy without a Federal Charter of Human Rights.

Today is Human Rights Day and 72 years since the adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*, a document which underpins all international human rights law and inspires us to continue to work to ensure all people can live in freedom, equality and dignity. This year’s Human Rights Day theme, “Recover Better”, focuses on the need to build back from the COVID-19 pandemic by ensuring human rights are central to recovery efforts.

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) President Kerry Weste says, “The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many of Australia’s failures in protecting, applying and balancing international human rights standards to tackle entrenched, systematic, and intergenerational inequalities, exclusion and discrimination. It again exposes the anomaly that Australia is the only nation in the developed Western world bereft of a Federal Charter of Human Rights to ensure we all live with dignity, equality and respect.”

“December 10 is an opportunity to reaffirm the importance of human rights in re-building the world and the Australia we want - one that legally protects everyone’s basic rights and freedoms. Australia was a founding member of the UN and one of eight nations involved in drafting the UDHR. We should be very proud of the part we played. However, just as complacency is a danger to our efforts to combat COVID-19, so too, complacency about increasingly disproportionate government measures and excessive executive powers that undermine human rights, endangers the inalienable rights which everyone in Australia is entitled to as a human being - regardless of their race, colour, religion, sex, language, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Two years ago, in the lead up to the 70th anniversary of the UDHR, former President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Professor Gillian Triggs, pointed out that we should all be alarmed at the failure of our legal system to protect fundamental rights. These rights have evolved over millennia as the very foundations of democracy. It is time for our federal politicians to open up a dialogue about a Federal Charter of Human Rights for Australia. We now have Human Rights Acts in the ACT, Victoria and Queensland. A Federal Charter of Human Rights would ensure that, instead of selectively enshrining Australia’s international legal obligations in Commonwealth legislation on a piecemeal basis, the human rights of all Australians are protected in a comprehensive national framework. This is about good governance. The citizens of every other comparable democratic nation enjoy such protections and Australians deserve nothing less.”

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ALHR was established in 1993 and is a national association of Australian solicitors, barristers, academics, judicial officers and law students who practise and promote international human rights law in Australia. ALHR has active and engaged National, State and Territory committees and specialist thematic committees. Through advocacy, media engagement, education, networking, research and training, ALHR promotes, practices and protects universally accepted standards of human rights throughout Australia and overseas.