

AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL STATEMENT TO THE 39TH SESSION OF THE UNESCO GENERAL CONFERENCE

Madame President of the General Conference, may I first congratulate you on your election, and assure you of Australia's support for you in your efforts in fulfilling the important task that you have taken on.

May I also extend on behalf of Australia our thanks to Mme Irena Bokova, for her determination and courage, and the good will she has brought to this organisation over the past eight years. We have greatly appreciated her untiring efforts to defend UNESCO and its mission throughout this particularly challenging period.

But as Mme Bokova contemplates the prospect of what will, we hope for her, be a less tumultuous time to pursue other goals, our thoughts turn to Mme Audrey Azoulay, who will have all the challenges, and I hope rewards, of moving UNESCO forward for some years to come. Australia congratulates her and has great confidence that UNESCO with its important mandate, is in excellent hands.

When we last met in this hall in 2015, our celebrations of the 70th anniversary of UNESCO were tragically marred by the events of 13 November. Today we continue to face the ongoing threat of terrorism and conflict around the world. Never has the need for a commitment to freedom, human creativity and intercultural dialogue been more pressing, nor UNESCO's mandate in education, culture, science and peaceful respect for diversity more important.

Australia believes deeply in the aims and purposes of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – reflecting our national values and an underlying principle of engagement with the international community. We remain committed to UNESCO and its work to ensure all

people have the right to be heard, and to freely express their opinions, beliefs and ambitions. We commend UNESCO for its ongoing work to protect journalists and to promote the diversity of cultural expression and look forward to further strengthening these freedoms through our work in UNESCO and as a member of the Human Rights Council for the 2018-2020 term.

Tolerance, respect for culture and heritage, agreeing to disagree on occasion, in ways that promote continued dialogue and peaceful coexistence: these are the ideals that counter violent extremism, and Australia will continue to stand with all those member states that are committed to using education to halt the radicalisation of young people.

The Australian people embrace the transformative power of education, and we will continue to support UNESCO's mandate in this critical area of human endeavour. People are better educated than ever before, and this is making them more mobile. With this in mind Australia will continue to advocate for a Global Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications to ensure that all students can follow their dreams and obtain the skills and knowledge they need to reach their full potential.

Just so, we remain engaged with the valuable work of the Education sector on the Global Education Monitoring Report that through its authoritative voice helps policy makers and development partners target their own efforts.

Perhaps most importantly, education is changing the lives of girls all over the world. This must continue to be a priority for us all. There can be no limits in our striving towards equality because there are girls out there right now, who will cure cancer, who will find alternative sources of energy, who will negotiate life-saving peace deals, if only they can get the education they need to be equipped for those tasks.

UNESCO's work in science is vital in protecting communities from the impact of natural disasters and contributing to social and economic progress. Surrounded by the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Australia is conscious of the importance of marine science, including to the "Big Ocean States", our neighbours in the Pacific region. Australia will remain actively involved in UNESCO's vital work, in particular, in oceans governance, marine science and tsunami warning through the International Oceanographic Commission.

UNESCO's World Heritage Convention brings together and aims to protect what is most special, most precious and most fragile about the physical world we live in. Australia is committed to making its contribution to the ongoing work of the World Heritage Committee. Our candidacy for a seat on the World Heritage Committee for 2017 to 2021 is built on the recognition that, while every country has a responsibility to protect its own heritage as best it can, the best results are achieved through partnership, through sharing expertise and recognising that we are all in this together.

When we met in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals were still new. Now, two years later, we have a better understanding of the magnitude of the task before us, if we are to achieve those goals by 2030. We must take all opportunities, including here in UNESCO, to advocate for enhanced cooperation between governments, the private sector and civil society in pursuit of these goals. Australia recognises it has a particular contribution to make in our Indo-Pacific region as our neighbours strive for sustainable peace, security and prosperity.

Today we find ourselves in a rare window of momentum for reform across the UN system. Australia has long supported reform to make the UN more efficient and effective, and we are pleased to support UN Secretary-General Guterres' agenda. This is also an excellent time to take stock of UNESCO's functions and working methods. We look forward to working with

the new Director-General, the Secretariat and all Member States on strengthening further our organisation, including its representativeness.

In this context, Australia strongly supports the campaign of the Cook Islands for a term on the next Executive Board. For too long, the Pacific has been under-represented in UNESCO's governing bodies. It is important for the voice of the region, and particularly the voice of the island states, to be heard.

Australia has been a member state of UNESCO since the beginning. At a time when our world faces particular tensions and division, multilateralism and a commitment to an international system based on agreed rules and norms has never been more important. Today we reaffirm our commitment to continuing to work through UNESCO to address global challenges, as we strive for a sustainable peace amongst all the peoples of the world. We encourage all member states to do the same.

Thankyou