

A Question of Rights

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If reports emanating from Canberra are correct, the Human Rights Commission is destined to die in December of this year. It is my hope that such reports are false. For the almost five years of its existence the Commission has been a leading protagonist for the disadvantaged of Australia, working with very limited resources and often in the face of carping and usually ill-informed criticism. Those who took the trouble to find out about its work in conciliation, community education, and research as well as its advisory role to Government, would have seen it as a valuable and relatively cost-effective operation. That it is less than perfect is undoubtedly true, but the aim should be to improve the Commission not to kill it off.

One cannot reasonably argue with measures of economy especially in times of national financial stringency, but it is reasonable to take issue with the priorities of the decision makers. How much would really be saved by scrapping the Commission? Very little, I suggest. Especially since it has been mooted that remnants of its operation would continue, possibly within the Department of the Attorney General. The real cost though would be to the nation - the deterioration of community relations, the feeling of abandonment by disadvantaged elements of the community. The Commission may have its limitations, legislative and financial but at least it is out there batting and is perceived to be so.

To the ethnic communities, and we are talking of some 30% of the Australian population, the Human Rights Commission together with the Special Broadcasting Service and the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs represent hard won gains following years of organisation and effort. These bodies, individually and collectively, are symbolic of a new deal - one based on mutual respect, tolerance and understanding between the many components of the Australian family. This was to signal the end of cultural alienation, the end of the notion of first and second class Australians. All this cannot be lightly thrown away.

It is within the power of the Government to save the Human Rights Commission - it should be strongly urged to do so.