

APRO submission to the federal government inquiry into the regulation of billboard and outdoor advertising

February 2011

Introduction

The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) is a peak body, auspiced by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), that was established in 2003 to help build interfaith harmony in Australia in context of heightened global conflict and terrorism.

We thank Dr Anna Dacre, Committee Secretary, for inviting a submission on this important matter of public concern from APRO.

APRO is unique in that it comprises representatives of major religious bodies as well as national-level multicultural community organisations. APRO is a practical example of how successfully diverse religious communities can work collaboratively in Australia. This work is vital to our goal of helping to build a harmonious community in Australia. APRO believes that social inclusion forms one part of a multicultural agenda and should include support for the hugely important interfaith work now being done in Australia and internationally. This was demonstrated by the Parliament of the World's Religions, week-long event held in Melbourne in December 2009, which attracted 6 500 participants and world-wide media coverage.

Australia remains a country where a majority of people profess a religious faith or pathway. The Census in 2006 shows that about 70 per cent of the population reported to be of a particular religion. For many Australians, religion is a sustaining force that awakens the capacity to love, to forgive, to create, to overcome prejudice, and to sacrifice for the common good. While secularism has a place in Australia and many Australians are not overtly religious, we should not underestimate the role of religion in the lives of many Australians, including those from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Religions also have influences on many aspects of cultural maintenance, with their practices at the root of many cultural traditions. This is evident within many culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities where religious dress and ceremony are inextricably entwined with cultural identity. It is therefore important that religions are not relegated to the margins or excluded from cultural policy in our multicultural society.

Key concerns about billboard and outdoor advertising

APRO's focus is on key community concerns about racial and religious vilification and incitement, with regard to large-scale public advertising and the effectiveness of current arrangements for managing this form of advertising in line with community expectations.

- We have serious concerns about hate speech and its consequences in fostering prejudice, discrimination, dehumanisation and violence in the community.
- Given the increasing sophistication and intrusiveness of large-scale advertising, and its impact on the built environment and public consciousness, as well as the wide proliferation in forms of advertising often transmitted on television and the internet through social media, the appropriateness and relevance of some of the material must be subject to appropriate regulation in this regard in line with community expectations.
- Billboards are means of transmission of messages under the rubric of public speech, not private matters, and consequently should bring into play existing legislation on public speech, whether or not the billboard is privately owned or located on private property.
- Australia already has laws against racial vilification and obscenity. Aside from Victoria, however, current anti-vilification laws do not apply to religious hate speech. This is a serious omission which needs to be addressed.
- Based on our shared belief in the inherent dignity of every human being, we also wish to register our concern about billboards and large-scale public advertising that portrays people in ways that are highly sexualised and demeaning. Such advertising serves to reinforce stereotypes and the inequality of men and women. Given that advertising of this nature is visible to all members of the community, including the youngest who are particularly impressionable and vulnerable, we feel that high standards should be applied in this area.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the current regulatory arrangements respond promptly and effectively to community concerns about any occurrences of hate speech/hate messages, including religious hate speech
- Ensure that the current arrangements have kept pace with technological developments
- Ensure that large scale public advertising is subject to legislation and regulation of racial and religious vilification or incitement.
- Ensure that large scale public advertising is subject to high standards in relation to the sexual and demeaning portrayal of both women and men.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

Sincerely



Professor Abd Malak AM
Chair

7 February 2011

Appendix

List of APRO member bodies

- National Council of Churches in Australia
- FECCA
- Australian Federation of Islamic Councils
- Executive Council of Australian Jewry
- Federation of African Communities Councils
- Australian Baha'i Community
- Australian Multicultural Foundation
- Federation of Australian Buddhist Councils
- Australian Sangha Association
- Adult Multicultural Education Service
- Sikh Community
- National Council of Migrant Resource Centres and Migrant Support Associations
- Hindu Community
- World Conference of Religions for Peace (Australia)