

## WATCHING BRIEF: AUSTRALIA AND THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

Australia's membership of the United Nations Security Council ended on 31 December 2014 after two years as a non-permanent elected member. This Brief gives an overview of what Australia contributed to the international organization during that time.

### Government Perspectives

The official approach to our role on the Security Council covered a number of themes:

- Ensuring a voice in the Council for small and medium countries.
- Giving priority to peacebuilding and development.
- Promoting enhanced use of preventive tools by the Council.
- Supporting local approaches to preventing violent conflict with appropriate international responses.
- Providing peacekeepers with the mandate, training and guidance needed to protect civilians.
- Involving women in operations and post-conflict building.
- Ensuring co-operation with regional bodies on peace and security issues.
- Making the work of the Council more transparent.

Gary Quinlan, the diplomat who served as Australia's representative on the Council, in his final speech, referred to the first secretary-General (Dag Hammarskjold) who spoke of the UN as not aiming to take humanity to heaven but to save it from hell. Gary Quinlan said that "in the past two years of Australia's term on the Council, heaven was never within reach, but there were many days when it seemed we were already deep in hell". He also drew attention to ongoing challenges such as terrorism, but affirmed the Council's strong efforts "to use the tools it has in innovative ways".

Since Australia was last on the Council in the 1980s the workload has increased greatly, with the Council meeting more than 300 times a year (as against about 25 times). Britain's ambassador, Mark Lyell Grant, described Australia's contribution as "bold" and "brave for standing up for what they believe and prepared to say it straight". (*ABC News Report*, 1 January 2015).

In a media release on 31 December 2014, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop MP identified the following achievements by Australia:

- Chairing the Al Qaida, Taliban and Iran sanctions committees.
- Strengthening Council resolutions on sanctions in response to threats from groups such as Boko Haram and ISIL.
- Securing groundbreaking resolutions on the humanitarian crisis in Syria.
- Coordinating the Council's work on Afghanistan during the transition from the NATO-led combat mission to the focus on training Afghan security forces.
- Strengthening the effectiveness of police deployments in UN peacekeeping missions.
- Ensuring that women are part of the conflict resolution processes.

- Securing a landmark resolution to curb the use of small arms and light weapons, to follow up the negotiation of the Arms Trade Treaty in which Australia played a major role.

On 24 February 2015, Gary Quinlan and others from the DFAT task force that worked in New York and in Canberra on Security Council issues gave a debriefing session to NGO representatives. The points that emerged from that session included:

- Australia was able to contribute more during its term on the Council because of solid preparation in advance, and by taking the lead on a number of significant issues (e.g. humanitarian aid to Syria) where there had been a logjam in the Council.
- Areas where Australia made an impact were peacebuilding/peacekeeping, small arms, protection of civilians, sanctions reform, and women, peace and security.
- There was regular contact between the Australian mission and international and national NGOs based in New York. This was very valuable in providing the mission with analysis and evidence on issues such as the humanitarian crises in Syria and South Sudan.
- Australia can continue to use its influence within the UN system to bring to New York people from places affected by conflict and crisis, to enable them to be better heard in the various UN bodies, including the Security Council.
- The vote by Australia against the UNSC resolution on advancing the recognition of Palestine will be used against Australia in future by the Arab nations in particular.
- Media coverage of Australia's work on the Council was limited largely to occasions when the Foreign Minister spoke in the Council meetings, but there is scope for more now as Gary Quinlan will visit different states to report on how the mission went.
- Other opportunities in the near future for Australia to contribute ideas (including from NGOs) are the climate summit in Paris in November, the world humanitarian summit in 2016, and the review of the UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security.
- Australia is consulting with New Zealand now an elected member of the Security Council, to encourage further advance of the concerns Australia promoted during its term.

## **Other Assessments**

Richard Gowan (Lowy Institute and New York University) said that Australia had surprised other UN diplomats by being proactive, focussing on sensitive issues and delving into areas where others fear to tread. Examples included (a) getting the Council to override Syria's sovereignty to get humanitarian assistance delivered to the war zones; (b) discussing the Ukrainian conflict and putting pressure on Russia; and (c) putting North Korea's human rights situation on the record. Despite the Coalition's earlier opposition to seeking a seat on the Council, it used its term effectively and Julie Bishop performed well as foreign minister. It showed its capacity to "play with the biggest powers", and this should give it more weight in the international body in future.

Lisa Sharland (Australian Strategic Policy Institute) pointed out that Australia could use its experience on the Council to develop closer links with the incoming members such as New Zealand, Spain and Malaysia. In addition, Australia should be in a good position to support a range of significant reviews taking place within the UN system on peace operations, peacebuilding architecture and women, peace and security. Given that over half the Security Council's agenda is likely to remain focused on Africa, Australia should build on its enhanced diplomatic relationships in that continent. Finally, Australia should ensure that it continues to work to make the United Nations even more effective in addressing the complex and diverse challenges ahead.

John Langmore (University of Melbourne) wrote an article for *The Saturday Paper* on 31 January 2015. He said that, while the ‘downing’ of the Malaysian Airlines plane in Ukraine had attracted the only significant Australian media attention to Australia’s role in initiating a resolution in the Security Council, Gary Quinlan and his team “contribute substantially more through constructive steps towards easing of conflicts and humanitarian crises and policy reform”. He identified the following as achievements during the two-year term:

- The agreement on regulating small arms and light weapons.
- Strengthening peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and action against the anarchy in the Central African Republic.
- Negotiating transition in Afghanistan from the International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) to a continuing international presence.
- Adding North Korea’s human rights violations to the Council agenda.
- Working with others to ensure better humanitarian access to Syria.

He referred to positive feedback from other Council members, and concluded that Australia’s contribution had been a success.

QPLC drafted a letter for the Presiding Clerk to send to the Foreign Minister commending the Australian role on the Security Council and urging ongoing support for the work of the United Nations.

### **What Next**

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop MP said in October 2014 that Australia is a leading contender for a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council. In an article by Matthew Knott (SMH) she was quoted as saying that Australia’s bid was “consistent with our nation’s history of promoting and protecting human rights”. The article went on to mention Australia’s policies on asylum seekers and welfare as likely to be subject to scrutiny in the Human Rights Council. A vote on the Council membership will take place in 2017. QPLC supports the move to get a seat on the Council.

Australian Friends are encouraged to maintain an interest in how the Australian Government works within the UN system. The DFAT website [www.dfat.gov.au](http://www.dfat.gov.au) Can be a useful source of information.

Canberra  
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### **Sources**

Gary Quinlan, *Australia’s Time at Top Table Comes to an End* (ABC News, 1 January 2015)  
Richard Gowan, *Australia Punched Above Its Weight* (ABC News report, 1 January 2015).  
Lisa Sharland, *No Seat at the Table, but Australia still has interests at stake* (ASPI Strategist, 28 January 2015).  
John Langmore, *The Security Council and Australia* (The Saturday Paper, 31 January 2015).  
Matthew Knott, *Australia Presses for Human Rights Council Seat despite UN Criticism* (Sydney Morning Herald, 12 October 2014).