



9 June 2016

Matthew Kronborg
National Executive Director
United Nations Association of Australia

Dear Mr Kronborg,

Thank you for the opportunity to outline Labor's position on the United Nations (UN).

Labor shares the conviction of United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA) members that the United Nations has been of enormous benefit to the world and that Australia's participation in the UN system is good for the global community and good for Australia.

Labor's support for and engagement with the UN has been a consistent thread in our policy and values since the days of H.V. "Doc" Evatt, who played such an important role in the early days of the UN, shaping it to be more than a club for powerful nations – instead, making it a truly multilateral institution capable of improving lives around the world.

Because of the United Nations, small states have an international voice, and middle powers like Australia can show global leadership. Shamefully, the Liberal Opposition ridiculed Labor's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council and threatened to abandon it. Nonetheless, Australia realised much during its term, including on Syria, MH17, small arms, and human rights in North Korea.

Labor supports Australia's Human Rights Council bid and will make sure Australia is able to influence the universal human rights agenda. Hopefully, it's now accepted bipartisan wisdom that Australia can and should show leadership at a global level, and that our interests are well served when Australia has a seat at the top table.

The UN has helped to prevent global war in the aftermath of two all-consuming conflicts in 30 years. In setting agreed human rights standards, the UN has provided both aspirations and goals for individuals and benchmarks to hold the international community to account.

The contribution of the UN to global health and human development is also immense. The elimination of smallpox, which killed hundreds of millions in the 20th century alone, is only one triumph. The Millennium Development Goals set targets that saw almost 6 million people saved from dying from malaria and about 37 million people saved from dying from tuberculosis. The rate of children dying before their fifth birthday was more than halved, and maternal mortality was almost halved.

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The international system with the UN at its core has enabled these successes.

Labor is proud that Labor Foreign Ministers like Bill Hayden, Gareth Evans, Stephen Smith, Kevin Rudd and Bob Carr contributed to the tradition started by Doc Evatt in their work on and support for UN-facilitated disarmament agreements and peace negotiations, such as the Cambodia Peace Process, the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons and the Arms Trade Treaty, which have made the world a safer place.

If Australia wants to insist that other nations play by the rules, we need to adhere to them as well. Australia has a good record in doing so, but not a flawless one. One issue on which we can and should do better is in settling a permanent maritime boundary with Timor Leste.

This significant and unresolved issue remains a source of tension between our two nations.

Australia's unwillingness to commit to maritime border negotiations has raised legitimate questions about our capacity to be a good neighbour and our commitment to a rules-based international system for resolving similar disagreements.

Respecting the international rule of law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), must inform the basis of our discussions with Timor-Leste about the future of the Timor Sea. When we seek security with our neighbours through a commitment to an international rule-based system – for example in the South China Sea – we must also accept the legitimacy of international rule-based processes in determining Australia's actions in the region.

A Shorten Labor Government will immediately commence discussions on a voluntary, binding resolution of a permanent maritime boundary between Australia and Timor-Leste. We want to fairly and finally settle this matter, either through bilateral negotiation or, if necessary, with the assistance of the International Court of Justice or a binding international arbitration.

Last year the UN turned seventy, and like all organisations, being as efficient and responsive as possible over such a long period requires renewal and sometimes reform.

Labor is in favour of reforms which improve the UN's ability to continue to play its vital role in the world. We believe that reform of the Security Council, including of the veto powers of permanent members, would increase effectiveness of the Council in responding to future conflicts.

In the 21st century the global community faces new international challenges – “problems without passports,” as former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan described them – that can't be stopped by borders. These include climate change, pandemics and global migration.

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Multilateralism and international co-operation will remain one of the three pillars of Labor's foreign policy approach and our commitment to engagement with and participation in the United Nations remains as strong today as it was when H.V. Evatt signed the Charter of the United Nations on behalf of Australia in 1945.

Thank you again for your letter.

Yours sincerely,

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