

Event to mark World Day Against the Death Penalty
20 October, United Nations Headquarters

Remarks

It is an honour for Australia to support World Day Against the Death Penalty and this valuable Parliamentary Factsheet on the Death Penalty and Terrorism.

Australia is a long-standing opponent of the death penalty. Next February it will be 50 years since Australia's last execution. It took many years for us to abolish the death penalty from our laws, but our own journey to abolition has made us a committed advocate for a global end to this most cruel form of punishment.

The role of parliamentarians is critical. Experience shows us that the public is rarely in favour of abolition of the death penalty before it occurs. That was the experience in Australia. Although there were public protests at the time of that last execution in 1967, polling continued to show that about half the Australian adult population supported the death penalty for murder. Over time, Australians realised that the crime rate didn't soar and our justice system continued to function without the death penalty. By 2009, the support rate for the death penalty had dropped to just 23 per cent.

Unfortunately, while support for the death penalty for murderers has dropped, there is still support among the Australian public for the use of the death penalty in response to deadly terrorist acts on Australian soil. Given that terrorism is an assault on the rights and freedoms that we hold dear, it is no surprise that people react so strongly, putting aside all the things they know about the death penalty – its cruelty, its ineffectiveness, its irreversible nature.

As public leaders, it is a country's law makers who are best able to bring about the changes necessary for abolition of the death penalty. Using their position in parliament, their influence with their constituents, their civil society and international connections, parliamentarians can take the lead in driving their nations towards a penal system that is fair, dignified and just. The activities and arguments outlined in this Factsheet are a valuable resource for parliamentarians wanting to undertake that work.

Australia stands ready to work with you, and to continue to advocate the case for change through every available avenue. As you know, Australia is a candidate for membership of the Human Rights Council for the 2018-20 term. If elected, we would use our position on the Council to advocate strongly for the global abolition of the death penalty.

We are also committed to increasing support for the General Assembly resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty due for consideration this year and currently under negotiation. We acknowledge this is not an easy task, but it is an important one.

I commend Parliamentarians for Global Action for their work on this Factsheet and I look forward to hearing the discussion on this important issue.