

**APRO Forum 2015:**

**“Building a community where we all belong”**

**Report to Multicultural NSW**

The Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations hosted a successful day-long interfaith forum on “Building a community where we all belong” in the Macquarie Room, NSW Parliament House, Sydney on Tuesday 17 November 2015.

Approximately 70 individuals attended the forum. The attendance was broad and diverse, with the majority being representatives and members of Australia’s faith communities: Baha’i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh.

Sponsorship for the forum was provided by a grant of \$1500 under the Multicultural NSW Grants Program - Celebration. The grant was received and expended by the National Council of Churches in Australia on behalf of APRO. Costs in excess of the grant were covered through accumulated funds of APRO, and direct and in-kind contribution by member organisations.

The forum provided a timely opportunity to advance discourse on a range of issues related to the role of religion in building a united and cohesive Australian community. It brought religious and community leaders together in an exchange of views that also included government officials, academics, and interested community members.

**Program**

The forum program was developed in the light of the May 2014 APRO forum, among the outcomes of which were:

- that religion has an importance place in the public square and in public discourse.
- that dialogue and exchange between our faith communities is extremely important and needs to continue and deepen. Dialogue should not be limited to the leaders of faith communities, it needs to broaden to include others including women and youth.
- that the role of young people in faith communities and interfaith dialogue needs greater attention and support.

The outcomes of the previous forum were re-affirmed, and the program included a strong emphasis on the voices of women and youth.

The key elements of the program were:

Welcome and acknowledgement of country by Mrs Josie Lacey OAM, who chaired the forum. Mrs Lacey asked all participants to rise for a minute's silence to honour victims of terrorism.

Official remarks by Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs; the Hon John Ajaka MLC, NSW Minister for Multiculturalism; and the Hon Sophie Cotsis MLC, NSW Shadow Minister for Multiculturalism.

Panel discussion on "The role of religious leaders in building community", moderated by Dr Sev Ozdowski OAM, Chair of the Australian Multicultural Council. The panellists were Professor Nihal Singh Agar AM, Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton, the Revd David Gill AM, Mr Ajmer Singh Gill, Dr Amin Hady, and Rev. Miao You. Questions addressed by the panel included:

- the role of religious leaders in the respective faith communities
- what makes a community cohesive
- what measures communities have taken to ensure members feel that they belong
- to what extent members of the respective faith communities feel they are part of the wider Australian community
- what each community's experience of internal community-building can contribute to the task of building an Australian community where we all belong
- how religious leaders can play a greater role in building an Australian community where we all belong.

Panel discussion on "Youth building community: Insights from the Youth Parliament of the World's Religions", moderated by Ashleigh Green, formerly of the Columban Mission Institute. The panellists were Mr Glen Falkenstein, Miss Shauna Humphries, Mr Kamran Khalid, Mr Linus Melingele, Mr Mark Scotto, Ms Balpreet Kaur Toor, and Mr Josh Young. The panel covered:

- how the idea of the Youth Parliament of the World's Religions came about
- what motivated the organisers
- what happened at the event
- the response received from the youth who attended
- what members of the organising committee learned
- the role youth can play in building community across different faiths
- how we can support them to play this role

- plans for what comes next.

Panel discussion on “Women of faith: building community together”, moderated by Jane Jeffes, Executive Producer in charge of Religion & Ethics programming and content at ABC Radio. The panellists were Dr Avril Alba, Ms Zohra Aly, Dr Elizabeth Delaney sgs, Mrs Safa Rahbar, Mrs Kalwant Kaur Singh, and Ms Wilma Viswanathan. This panel addressed questions including:

- the role women play within the respective faith communities
- whether special efforts need to be made to involve women across all aspects of community life
- initiatives that have brought women of faith together to build community across faith boundaries
- what has been learned from these initiatives
- particular qualities or strengths that women bring to community-building.

Closing remarks by Dr Natalie Mobini (Australian Baha’i Community)

### **Sponsorship**

The forum website and program acknowledged that the forum was sponsored by the NSW Government through Multicultural NSW and included its logo. The government banner was borrowed from Multicultural NSW and placed in a prominent position behind the lectern (see photographs). Both opening and closing speakers acknowledged and expressed appreciation for this sponsorship.

A financial statement of income and expenditure is provided separately.

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1: Forum program

Appendix 2: Speaker biographies

Appendix 3: Photographs

Appendix 4: Text of official remarks

## Appendix 1: Program



## Program

# Building a community where we all belong

**Tuesday 17 November 2015  
Macquarie Room, Parliament House**

**9.30 am Registration**

**10.00 Welcome  
am**

**Welcome and acknowledgement of country:** Mrs Josie Lacey OAM  
(Forum co-convenor)

**Introduction to APRO**

**10.15 Panel Discussion: The role of religious leaders in  
am building community**

**Moderator:** Dr Sev Ozdowski OAM

**Panellists:**

Professor Nihal Singh Agar AM, Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton, The Revd David Gill AM, Mr Ajmer Singh Gill, Dr Amin Hady, Rev. Miao You

**12.00      Official remarks**

Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs

The Hon John Ajaka MLC, NSW Minister for Multiculturalism

The Hon Sophie Cotsis MLC, NSW Shadow Minister for Multiculturalism

**12.15 pm      Panel Discussion: Youth building community: Insights from the Youth Parliament of the World's Religions**

**Moderator:** Ms Ashleigh Green

**Panellists:**

Mr Glen Falkenstein, Miss Shauna Humphries, Mr Kamran Khalid, Mr Linus Melinele, Mr Mark Scotto, Ms Balpreet Kaur Toor, Mr Josh Young

**1.15 pm      Lunch**

**2.30 pm      Panel Discussion: Women of faith: Building community together**

**Moderator:** Ms Jane Jeffes, Executive Producer, Religion & Ethics, ABC Radio

**Panellists:**

Dr Avril Alba, Ms Zohra Aly, Dr Elizabeth Delaney sgs, Mrs Safa Rahbar, Mrs Kalwant Kaur Singh, Ms Wilma Viswanathan

**3.45 pm      Closing remarks**

**Summation and thanks:** Dr Natalie Mobini (Forum co-convenor)

**4.00 pm      Close**

*Funding for this event has been provided by the NSW government through Multicultural  
NSW*

## Appendix 2: Speaker biographies

### Speaker biographies

#### MC

##### **Mrs Josie Lacey OAM**

Josie Lacey is a founding member of APRO, Foundation Convenor of the Women's Interfaith Network, Chair of Religions for Peace NSW, and a life member of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. She is active in the promotion of racial and religious harmony, anti-racism, women's rights and Jewish community leadership. In 2013 she received the NSW Premier's inaugural Lifetime Community Service award "for her dedicated service over 30 years to the promotion of interfaith and inter-communal harmony, and achievements in multiculturalism spanning social justice, anti-racism, women's rights and children's rights".

#### Official remarks

##### **Senator the Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells**

Senator Fierravanti-Wells was born in Wollongong, the daughter of Italian migrants. After completing her primary and secondary education in Wollongong, she attended the Australian National University in Canberra, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws. Prior to entering the Senate, she worked with the Australian Government Solicitor for 20 years, including periods of secondment as a policy advisor to the Federal Opposition and Senior Private Secretary to former Premier John Fahey. For about 25 years before becoming a Senator, she was involved in many community activities, including as a founding board director of a nursing home in Wollongong and on the Board of Father Chris Riley's Youth off the Streets, serving two years as Chairman. She has had over 30 years in social policy issues. She became a Senator on 5 May 2005 and established her electorate office in Wollongong. In September 2015 she was made Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs. In this capacity she is Parliamentary Secretary to the Attorney-General, the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection and the Minister for Social Services.

##### **The Hon John Ajaka MLC**

The Hon. John Ajaka MLC is the NSW Minister for Ageing, Minister for Disability Services, and Minister for Multiculturalism. He was elected as a Member of the NSW Legislative Council in 2007, and has previously served as Parliamentary Secretary for Transport and Roads, and before that, as Parliamentary Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition. He has also served as the Chairperson of Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 3, and of the Select Committee on the NSW Taxi Industry, as well as being a member of the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Law and Justice, a member of the Privileges Committee, and the Committee on Children and Young People. Before entering Parliament, he served as a Councillor for

the City of Rockdale from 2004 until 2008. He has previously operated a legal practice over 25 years. He served on the board of a number of companies, including a public company. He is married and has six daughters.

### **The Hon Sophie Cotsis MLC**

Sophie Cotsis was elected to the Legislative Council in 2010. Prior to entering Parliament, she held a number of positions in the private and public sectors including working for an infrastructure company, as an advisor to the NSW Treasurer, with the Liquor and Hospitality Division of the LHMU (now United Voice) and as a shiftworker at Sydney Airport. Since being elected to Parliament she has served as Shadow Minister for Citizenship, Industrial Relations, Local Government, Housing and Mental Health. As Shadow Minister for Housing she helped to initiate an inquiry into Social, Public and Affordable Housing. She currently serves as Shadow Minister for Ageing, Shadow Minister for Disability Services, and Shadow Minister for Multiculturalism

### **Panel Discussion: The role of religious leaders in building community**

#### **Dr Sev Ozdowski OAM (moderator)**

Dr Ozdowski is the Director, Equity and Diversity at the University of Western Sydney and Adjunct Professor of the Centre of Peace and Conflict Studies at University of Sydney. He is also Chair of the Australian Multicultural Council, an advisory body to the Australian Government on multicultural issues and programmes. From 2000 to 2005, Dr Ozdowski was the Australian Human Rights Commissioner and Disability Discrimination Commissioner at the then Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. He also headed the Office of Multicultural and International Affairs in South Australia for five years, and since 2006 is the President of the Australian Council for Human Rights Education. Dr Ozdowski's work is recognised through various Australian and international honours, including an Order of Australia medal in 1995.

#### **Professor Nihal Singh Agar AM**

Professor Agar was born, brought up and educated in North India. He came to Armidale, NSW in 1967 as a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Physiology at the University of New England, and retired from there in 2000 as Professor and Head of that Department. Since 2001 he has been Honorary Associate in School of Molecular Bioscience at the University of Sydney. His community services include Founding President of the Australian Chapter of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Organisation)(1990-2005); Founding President of Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation of Australia (One Teacher Schools in Tribal and remote rural area in India) ( 2004-2009 );



and Chairman of the Hindu Council of Australia (2009--). This year he was made a member of the Order of Australia (AM) for significant service to the Hindu community in Australia, to the fostering of cross-cultural cooperation and networking, and to medical education.

### **Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton**

Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton was born in Manchester, England. He earned an MA in History at Queens' College, Cambridge and a PhD in Jewish History at Birkbeck, University of London. For seven years he worked in the Ministry of Justice in London and then studied for four years at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) in New York. There, he was editor of its journal and winner of the prize for excellence in Talmudic study. As part of his pastoral training Rabbi Elton undertook residencies as a hospital chaplain and leading a grief support group. He received rabbinical ordination from YCT in June 2015, and in addition has ordination from Rabbi Chaim Rapoport of London and Rabbi Natan Greenberg of Bat Ayin in Israel. In addition to his 2009 book, *Britain's Chief Rabbis and the Religious Character of Anglo-Jewry, 1880–1970*, he has authored several articles on Anglo-Jewish religious history. He is an Honorary Associate of the University of Sydney and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of London. He has been a Visiting Scholar at New York University and Columbia University and a Fellow at the Tikvah Fund, where he met his wife, Hinda. He served as Rabbinic Fellow at Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan until he was appointed Chief Minister of the Great Synagogue in Sydney in June 2015.

### **The Revd David Gill AM**

Ordained in 1965, David Gill served on the staff of the Australian Student Christian Movement, studied in the USA and Switzerland and worked for 12 years with the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. He was general secretary of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, the Australian Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches in Australia before taking on what he says was the best job of the lot: pastor of Kowloon Union Church, Hong Kong. Along the way he has visited over 60 countries, sat through more synods and assemblies than he cares to remember, been closely involved with the Christian Conference of Asia, served on the Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church and helped promote relations between Australia's Christians and people of other faiths.

### **Sardar Ajmer Singh Gill**

Sardar Ajmer Singh Gill is the President of the National Sikh Council of Australia, an umbrella body of the Sikh community in Australia. He was born in Singapore, raised in Malaysia, studied in England and worked in Malaysia before coming to Australia in 1981 and working as an educator in Tennant Creek, Darwin and Western Sydney. He

has displayed great leadership in addressing Sikh issues, educating the public about Sikhs and helping community members to play a full role in Australian life including contributing to government policy. In 2004 he organised the first ever Australian World Sikh Conference and from 2007 onwards Sikh participation at the annual Sydney ANZAC Day march. He recognises youth is the future and has worked hard to organise camps and forums since 1998. In 2005 he received the NSW Community Relations Commission Award for Community Service. Passionate about interfaith relations, he participates regularly in interfaith workshops, conferences and seminars. He is a member of Religions for Peace (NSW), represents the National Sikh Council of Australia on APRO and presented a paper at the Parliament of World Religions in Melbourne 2009.

### **Dr Amin Hady**

Amin Hady was born in Indonesia and went through his tertiary education at the Islamic University in Medina and his postgraduate study at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. He gained his PhD from the University of New South Wales on Education and Politics. He was the Imam of Canberra Mosque before he moved to Sydney as the Imam of Zetland Mosque until now. Dr Hady is co chair of the National Abrahamic Dialogue of Christian, Muslim and Jews and member of APRO representing the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils. He received the NSW Premier's Awards for Multiculturalism and Harmony in 2013.

### **Ven. Miao You**

Venerable Miao You is one of the resident teachers at Nan Tien Temple, Wollongong. She is a disciple of the world renowned Dharma Master, Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Venerable Miao You has resided at the Nan Tien Temple for the past 13 years after spending two years in Fo Guang Shan, Taiwan where she received her training from the Meditation College. Besides being an experienced teacher in Mahayana Buddhism, she also holds a Bachelor of Education degree from Macquarie University. She is also the Secretary and a Director of the Nan Tien Institute, a higher education institution based on Buddhist values and wisdom.

### **Panel Discussion: Youth building community: Insights from the Youth Parliament of the World's Religions**

**Ms Ashleigh Green** (moderator)

Ashleigh has spent the last three years working in Christian-Muslim Relations for the Columban Mission Institute and is one of the Christian members on the Youth PoWR team. Ashleigh is studying a Master of Social Work and is passionate about engaging youth in interfaith dialogue to break down stereotypes and create a more harmonious society for all.

### **Glen Falkenstein**

Glen is the Jewish representative on the Youth PoWR team, a writer and film fanatic. He is a Policy Analyst at the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council and the Youth Chair of the Ethnic Communities' Council NSW.

### **Shauna Humphries**

Shauna represents the Baha'i community on the Youth PoWR team. Uniting the vision of youth and leaders in Sydney and embracing diversity has always been a goal close to Shauna's heart. She was raised on Sydney's lower North Shore and is currently working with youth in her community to reach their full potential and contribute to the service of humanity.

### **Kamran Khalid**

Kamran is a Muslim by faith and a lawyer by profession and has lived in Sydney for over eight years. Kamran believes in a society where all faiths are respected and their followers are afforded fairness and justice.

### **Linus Melingele**

Linus is the Buddhist representative on the Youth PoWR team. As a civil engineering student with an artistic side, Linus believes that breaking down barriers and stigma is important if we are to achieve the common goal of happiness for all. Linus has been a member of the UNSW Buddhist society for three years and was part of the committee for one term as a magazine editor.

### **Balpreet Kaur Toor**

Balpreet is an Australian Sikh who doubles as a Finance major. Working heavily with Sikh Youth Australia, she's been able represent them at a parliamentary forum based on 'Faith and Values'. Working with and breaking down barriers with other religious communities is what brought her to start the Sikh Students Association at Macquarie University, where interfaith activities and large scale events are held to spread positive awareness about Sikhism and the importance of interfaith harmony.

### **Mark Scotto**

Mark by name and marketer by trade, he is one of the Christian crew onboard the Youth PoWR cruise ship committee. Born and raised in south-west Sydney, Mark is a practicing Melkite Catholic and is currently working towards establishing his own non-for-profit organization to help the less fortunate.

### **Josh Young**

Josh represents the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on the Youth PoWR team and has been involved in community initiatives and church projects for a number of years. Josh studies architecture at the University of Technology Sydney.

### **Panel Discussion: Women of faith: Building community together**

**Ms Jane Jeffes** (moderator)

Jane Jeffes is Executive Producer in charge of Religion & Ethics programming and content at ABC Radio. Jane joined the corporation in July 2013 and is responsible for nine hours of programming each week on Radio National, Local Radio across the country, Radio Australia, Classic FM and NewRadio. Her brief is to strengthen and extend the ABC's coverage of religion and related topics. Prior to joining the ABC, she produced and directed television documentaries for ABC TV, SBS and Al Jazeera. Before moving to Australia in 2000, Jane spent 11 years working in UK radio and television, most latterly as Head of Programmes at the UK's largest independent radio production company developing, supervising and producing a wide range of programming for the BBC and commercial sectors. *Something Understood*, which Jane created for BBC Radio 4, is now in its 20th year.

### **Dr Avril Alba**

Avril is Lecturer in Holocaust Studies and Jewish Civilisation in the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies at the University of Sydney. She teaches and researches in the broad areas of Holocaust and modern Jewish history with a focus on Jewish and Holocaust museums. Her monograph *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Secular Sacred Space* exploring the largely unexamined topic of museums as sacred spaces was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2015. From 2002-2011 Avril was the Education Director at the Sydney Jewish Museum where she also served as the Project Director/Curator for the permanent exhibition *Culture and Continuity* in 2008-09. She continues to serve as the consulting lead curator for the museum's permanent Holocaust exhibition. Avril's other research interests include Australian Holocaust memory, the 'activist' museum, onsite Holocaust education and pre-war Jewish museums and exhibitions.

### **Ms Kalwant Kaur**

Kalwant Kaur heads two departments at a foreign bank in Sydney. She is also actively involved in Sikh community initiatives, having taken the lead in pushing for education in the area of women's health. She also teaches Punjabi to young children as a public service and has voluntary teacher in Punjabi and has served as a facilitator at camps conducted by Sikh organisations in Sydney. She has represented Sydney's Sikh community at public functions such as the interfaith memorial service at the Town Hall for tsunami victims and at St Mary's Church for the Lindt Café victims. She is a member of the Womens' Interfaith Network Group (Parramatta).

**Ms Zohra Aly**

Zohra Aly is on the Board of Trustees at Imam Hasan Centre in Annangrove, Sydney. She has been a member of the Women's Interfaith Network since 2010, and National Co-ordinator for Australia and facilitator for Creators of Peace, an international women's community peace-building group. She is also a facilitator for Together For Humanity. She is a pharmacist and freelance writer.

**Sr Elizabeth Delaney sgs**

Elizabeth Delaney is a Sister of the Good Samaritan. In January 2015 she commenced as General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in Australia. Prior to that she was Executive Secretary for Church Life for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for ten years. She has worked in and for the Catholic Church for many years as a teacher, administrator, and diocesan chancellor.

**Ms Safa Rahbar**

Safa Rahbar works as the National Discourses Officer for the Australian Baha'i Community, and is currently focused on contributing to the discourse on the role of religion in advancing gender equality. She presently serves as a member of the Steering Group for the Equality Rights Alliance and a member of its Young Women's Advisory Group. In addition to her work with the Baha'i Community, she works for Healthy North Coast and has an background in psychology and international public health.

**Ms Wilma Viswanathan**

Wilma Viswanathan is a member of the Uniting Church in Australia and has served its National Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths (ROF) for 22 years. She is a member of the Women's Interfaith Network, Religions for Peace and the Anti-Slavery Project. She worked in the National Council of Churches in Australia for 15 years. Born in Sri Lanka, she came to Australia in 1983. In Sri Lanka, she worked in the YWCA of Colombo and was a member of the Student Christian Movement and the Church of Ceylon Youth Movement.

**Closing remarks****Dr Natalie Mobini**

Dr Natalie Mobini is the Director of the Office of External Affairs for the Australian Baha'i Community. In this capacity she represents the Baha'i community in its dealings with the Australian Government, and works with other community groups to

promote peace, human rights, the equality of women and men and inter-faith dialogue. She has been involved in inter-faith dialogue at the national level for some 15 years, including serving as the Baha'i Community's representative on APRO, and convening groups of the Women's Interfaith Network in Sydney and Canberra. She received her doctorate from Monash University for her historical research on the Arab minority in Indonesia.

### Appendix 3: Photographs

#### Forum convenors with official speakers and some panellists



#### Opening remarks by Josie Lacey





**Panel 1: Religious leaders**



**Panel 2: Youth with forum convenors**





### **Panel 3: Women of faith**



### **Forum participants in informal discussion**



## **Appendix 4: Official remarks**

### **Senator The Hon Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs**

Thank you Josie, thank you very, very much. Can I start by adding my acknowledgement of country. Can I acknowledge Minister John Ajaka and Sophie Cotsis and Walt Secord.

As Assistant Minister for Multicultural Affairs, I am really pleased to join you here today. I know there are many, many distinguished guests here today – can I acknowledge you all. Ladies and gentlemen.

Can I thank the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations for organising this forum.

This ‘Building a community where we all belong’ forum is a great example of Australian organisations, communities and individuals continuing to take social cohesion very, very seriously.

We are one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. With almost half (47%) of Australians either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. We identify with about 300 different ancestries and we speak almost as many languages, including indigenous languages.

Most of the world’s religions are practised in Australia, with the 2011 Census showing increasing numbers, according to those statistics.

We are a multicultural society, contemporary Australia is multicultural Australia; and we are demonstrating that in so many ways – and in the most recent situation with the additional intake of 12,000 people over the next 18 months under our humanitarian programme – families, women and children that are fleeing the conflict in Syria and Iraq.

The latest Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion released recently confirmed that social cohesion in Australia is at an eight-year high.

The report showed that Australians continue to overwhelmingly support a multicultural Australia and that we have a high sense of belonging.

This is a good result, but the report does confirm some challenges for contemporary Australia. For example, about 22% of respondents expressed negative attitudes towards Muslims - down from 25% last year. However, this is still too high.

And while it is important that we continue to celebrate and promote our social cohesion, we must recognise there are also challenges.

Overseas conflicts such as the violence in Syria and Iraq, and the weekend attacks in Paris, have the potential to cause tensions in Australian communities and threaten our community cohesion.

As I mentioned in my address to the National Press Club recently, I believe that the tragic Parramatta incident is a turning point –a crossroads moment. And now we will wait to see the fall-out and responses from the Paris attacks.

Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to draw on our reserves of goodwill, of respect that is so evident in our community when we are faced with challenging times. We will meet these challenges if we meet them together.

Interfaith dialogue, in forums such as this, plays a role by enabling common, cooperative and positive interactions within and between different religions.

Strong social cohesion is critical in combating extremism and providing a framework for our national unity. Faith is an important part of the lives of many Australians, providing meaning, purpose and inspiration to their daily lives.

The Commonwealth Government values all our faith communities. They are an integral part of our diverse and accepting society, enriching and enlivening our society.

We want Australians of all faiths to continue to be free to express their beliefs and practise their religion without intimidation and interference. We take great pride that our faith communities are cohesive and we don't experience the divisions of some other countries.

One of the most important things in Australia that have made us, not just one of the most culturally diverse but one of the most socially cohesive nations on earth is the social glue that binds us together.

Those important things that we share as Australians – values and beliefs, are underpinned by a strong and practical interfaith framework.

Recently, I attended the Great Synagogue where Archbishop Fisher was delivering the *Nostra Aetate* address along with the Chief Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton who joins us here today.

Sitting in the second pew was the Grand Mufti of Australia who was joined by the Melkite Bishop, by the Armenian Bishop, by other interfaith leaders in this country. This is a strong practical example of interfaith at work in Australia today.

Can I conclude by thanking the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations for hosting this important event.

A harmonious multi-faith dialogue is a significant part of our social fabric and will continue to be so in the future – indeed I think it will be more so in the future.

Can I wish you all the best for this today's deliberations.

Thank you.

**The Hon John Ajaka MLC, NSW Minister for Multiculturalism**

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we now stand on and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

I want to welcome everyone here to Parliament for the 2015 Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations Forum.

It's fantastic to see representatives of the faith communities, members of multicultural community organisations, academics and all the volunteers who have given their time and effort to participate in this forum.

Can I start by saying that our hearts and prayers go out to the families and friends of victims in the aftermath of the tragic attacks in Paris – and all attacks that are taking place throughout the world, such as Lebanon, the rest of the Middle East and Europe.

Acts of terrorism have no place in our free and democratic society.

These acts of hate and violence are intended to divide us but Australians have shown that they stand united in the face of terror.

We must all realise that community harmony takes effort and commitment, and we all have a role to play in safeguarding our peaceful way of life against hate, division and violence.

In ancient times, a forum was a public place, where gatherings of important social significance and diverse activities took place. It was the centre of public life.

Today, I can say that this forum on “Building a community where we all belong” is of great social significance for us all.

It will play an essential role in advancing our efforts to create and maintain a harmonious community in a multi-faith society.

It is a demonstration of the commitment by the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations to promote a broader understanding of our multicultural and multi-faith community.

NSW, is one of the most culturally diverse states in the world, as we come from as we come from about 225 birth-places, speak more than 200 languages, and practice more than 100 religions.

Here, we can find mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples. In some suburbs these places of religious worship may be found just a short distance from one another. In fact, all the world's major religions are professed here.

It is likely that continued immigration to Australia, and the forces of globalisation, will continue to bring people of different beliefs together.

We are continually challenged today by upheavals and conflict perpetrated in the name of religions throughout the world.

As a result, in Australia, we have become home to people who are fleeing such conflicts.

Continuous efforts have been made in New South Wales for cultural and religious differences to be acknowledged and respected.

This is an ongoing responsibility, and one which should not only be borne by those civic authorities and those in government, but also by those who have influence within their own communities.

As Minister for Multiculturalism, I am proud to say that NSW was the first state to enshrine cultural diversity in legislation. One of the principles is to respect the religion of others.

The *Multicultural NSW Act 2000* declares that the people of New South Wales “are free to profess, practise and maintain their own linguistic, religious, racial and ethnic heritage”.

The legislation fosters the belief that although we come from different parts of the world, we speak different languages, and we practise different faiths –we should all have equal respect for each other.

We are a firm advocate for the promotion of religious respect and understanding. It has worked hard towards promoting community harmony within our multicultural society.

The public stand made by the NSW government in hosting and supporting major religious events is critical. It has led the way in bringing about a deeper understanding between religions.

I am very grateful to be a witness to today’s inter-faith forum seeing all of you making your invaluable contribution to this State.

Today, I am reminded of the understanding, acceptance and respect shown by our communities towards each others’ faiths.

For those of you who attended last year, you will be reminded of the issues discussed on the role of religion in Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Issues such as the extent of religious freedom, combating religious prejudice and discrimination, and the challenge of building a united community.

Similarly, the theme of this forum: “Building a community where we all belong” brings a message which leaders of various faiths will be eager to take across to the whole of the population, from school children through to our Seniors.

This forum plays an essential role in encouraging mutual understanding, in finding ways to work with our religious differences and, ultimately, in building a community where we all belong.

I commend you all for your contribution. We can all benefit so much by a harmonious, multi-cultural, multi-faith community. I am confident that this forum will encourage positive relationships.

I would like to thank the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations, APRO, for having me here today.

I want to thank each and every one of you on behalf of the NSW Government for your contribution to a harmonious multi-faith community.

**The Hon Sophie Cotsis MLC, NSW Shadow Minister for Multiculturalism**

It is an honour to be able to speak at today’s forum.

I’d like to acknowledge the many wonderful religious and community leaders who are here today.

In particular I’d like to acknowledge Natalie Mobini from the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations for organising today’s event and inviting me to speak.

Today’s event showcases the best of Australia’s multicultural society.

This forum brings together people from all faiths and all walks of life to engage in dialogue and strengthen bonds of friendship and harmony in our community.

It is fitting that you have chosen to meet in Australia’s oldest Parliament.

This building embodies the spirit of people coming together in common cause to build something greater than themselves.

Parliament is often characterised by robust debate and the free exchange of ideas.

But however much we might disagree – we always remember that the things which unite us far outweigh the things which divide us.

This spirit is essential in the difficult times we now live in.

From Paris to Beirut, from Turkey to Egypt, even here in Parramatta and Martin Place – we have seen the terrible devastation that can be caused by those who advocate hatred and division.

In the face of such horror, some may be tempted toward frustration and as “what is to be done?”

The answer is clear: you are doing it.

By coming to events like today, you show that our community will never be divided.

By coming here today you are putting harmony over hatred, dialogue over division, and showing that our voices, not violence, are the way to build a better world.

Thank you for your dedication to harmony and social inclusion.

I wish you all the best for this afternoon.