

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
Ligue internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté
Liga Internacional de Mujeres por la Paz y la Libertad
Internationale Frauenliga für Frieden und Freiheit

Consultative Status with United Nations ECOSOC, UNCTAD and UNESCO

Special Consultative Relations with FAO, ILO and UNICEF

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5 February 2008

Hon Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

We are writing on behalf of the Australian Section of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) to congratulate you on the election result of November last year and also to congratulate you on your appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs. WILPF is an international non-government organisation in existence since 1915. Our Australian Section works with many related NGOs to campaign on disarmament, resolution of conflict by non-violent means, sustainable environment and women's rights.

We welcome your government's recent decision to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq. We also welcomed the ALP's election platform promise not to sell Australian uranium to India – a non-signatory to the NPT.

Regrettably, during the eleven years of the Howard Government, WILPF had too many reasons to communicate with Mr Downer.

Like the great majority of Australians, we deplored Australia's involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a partner in the Coalition of the Willing. We were especially alarmed that the Howard Government was willing to participate in that invasion with no mandate from the UN Security Council.

This repudiation of the processes of the United Nations was not an isolated one on the part of the Howard Government. During the past eleven years, we witnessed the waning of Australian support for multilateral institutions such as the UN while

ironically the same government strongly supported multilateral institutions in the economic sphere such as the WTO and IMF.

Like most Australians, we believe that our alliance with the US should not be allowed to lead us into submission or acquiescence in relation to “our great and powerful friend”; we were continuously dismayed by the Howard Government’s failure to speak out against the United States’ use of extraordinary rendition, their use of torture (however elastic their definition) against inmates in places such as Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib and in their secret network of prisons in Europe and Africa.

In addition, we had to write to Mr Downer on numerous occasions concerning the failure to ensure that David Hicks received a fair and timely trial.

While we are ardent supporters of a strong bilateral relationship with Indonesia, this should not extend to Australian support for institutions in Indonesian society which have been responsible for terrorist or criminal acts. On this matter also we had to communicate with Mr Downer.

WILPF is hopeful that with the new Labor Government, remedies may be found to address our concerns on these matters.

Over the last eleven years, we have also seen a far greater focus on militarism through increased annual joint training exercises with the United States and other nations, especially at Shoalwater Bay in Queensland. At the same time, there has been a noticeable increase in the ‘glorification of war’ through a changed attitude to the commemoration of Anzac Day and other war memorial events with a recent call for community groups to receive Commonwealth grants promoting Anzac Day. WILPF would like to see an equal emphasis given to the commemoration of Australia’s excellent role in peacekeeping.

We were regretful that Mr Downer was unable to build on the achievement of his predecessor in the work of the Canberra Commission on the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons. As the disarmament agenda has been stalled for the last decade and as nuclear weapons remain a threat of great significance, it is our sincere hope that you will be able to reconvene the Canberra Commission so that its unfinished agenda may be fulfilled.

We look forward to progress on these important issues over the term of your government.

Once again, our best wishes for your appointment as Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Yours sincerely

Cathy Picone and Ruth Russell
Joint National Coordinators