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Media release

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Expert: Overhaul UN human rights but not Howard's way

United Nations Human Rights committees are in dire need of an overhaul but Australian proposals for reform are aimed only at further covering up a lamentable retreat from international obligations under the Howard Government, according to a new paper on the issue.

Dr Clive Hamilton, Executive Director of the public policy think tank, The Australia Institute, released the paper today. The *New Anti-Internationalism: Australia and the United Nations Human Rights Treaty System* was prepared for the Institute by La Trobe University academic Associate Professor Spencer Zifcak. Professor Zifcak is also a Vice-President of the International Commission of Jurists.

“This is one of the most comprehensive analyses to date of Australia’s role in recent bitter altercations with UN committees on human rights issues from the Tampa and the so-called Pacific Solution to our ongoing failings with indigenous affairs,” Dr Hamilton said.

“Professor Zifcak details Australia’s intransigence in the face of UN criticism. He traces the Howard Government’s move away from international human rights law to populist domestic politics pursued at the expense of international obligations often pioneered by Australia in the past.”

Professor Zifcak says Australia’s relations with UN Human Rights committees have deteriorated to an unprecedented degree.

“The Government has had a stunning public relations success in side-lining human rights by exploiting economic insecurity and, more recently, terrorism, and painting human rights supporters as a politically correct minority, anti-nationalist and at odds with the so-called forgotten Anglo-Saxon majority,” he said.

“Australia was a proud contributor to the international legal regime so patiently and co-operatively set up after WWII. Our rejection of it now is contributing to its corrosion. The long-term harm to standards of human rights internationally is incalculable. When Australia thumbs its nose at basic standards, human rights abuses become easier for less democratic states.”

Professor Zifcak says that UN Committees which had criticised Australia were themselves in need of reform. His nine point plan for reform includes broadening the sources of information on which committees rely, refining appointment procedures to ensure committee members have relevant legal qualifications and well-founded reputations for impartiality, and amalgamating the present six human rights committees into one.

“The answer lies not in making it easier for recalcitrant States like Australia to retreat down a patriotic Anglo-Saxon yellow brick road. It lies instead in strengthening the UN to make it harder for States to shirk their human rights obligations, at home and abroad, by pointing to failings in the organisation’s human right system” he said.

A summary of the Report can be found under What’s New on the Institute’s website at

www.tai.org.au