



Opinion by
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Reminding government: human rights are core business

To commemorate the 68th anniversary of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** on 10 December, Patrick Emerton discussed why human rights are more important than ever, and why governments must not forget their role.

What are human rights, and why do they matter? Part of an answer can be found in the 1945 **Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations**:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED ... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and ... to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and ... to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS.

And the 1948 **Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** tells us a bit more:

[T]he peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom ... [and] Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in cooperation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms.... Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations ...

In other words, human rights express a commitment, by the governments of the world, to work together in pursuit of social progress and larger freedom. They set an international standard that all countries are committed to meeting, and are committed to helping others meet also.

Why do we need this promise from our governments?

Because governments wield power, and they have not always used that power to pursue social progress and larger freedom. The founders of the United Nations were acutely conscious of the two World Wars, and the Depression that occurred in between them.

These were preeminent examples of governments wielding their

power (in the case of the wars) or failing to do so (in allowing the world to fall into such a profound economic slump) because they were motivated by other consideration than *the dignity and worth of the human person and the social advancement of all peoples*.

In our own time governments still fail to use their powers in ways that consistently promote these ends. Pointing to just a few examples in this century that echo events in the first half of the last one, there has been:

- The pursuit of an ongoing series of wars from Libya to Afghanistan with no apparent end in sight;
- Once again allowing much of the world to fall into economic slump;
- The continuing failure to take serious steps to deal with lopsided concentrations of wealth within and (even more so) between countries.

This is why human rights, and the invocation of human rights standards, matter. To remind a government of its human rights commitments is not disloyal. It is simply holding the government to its commitment, to its fundamental promise, (i) to use its power in a way that puts the wellbeing of people first, and (ii) to do that within an international framework that establishes a common standard for all countries.

Because human rights are about the *proper* use of government power – not just *refraining* from the use of power – we also have to recognise that the pursuit of human rights by our government might place demands on us, as diverse as:

- Demands to pay taxes (how else is the machinery of social progress going to work?);
- Demands to pay adequate wages (how else are people going to live in dignity?);
- Demands to submit to regulation (how else are economic slumps to be avoided?);
- Demands to sit as jurors (how else are fair criminal trials going to take place?);
- Demands to tolerate beliefs and practices that we may not personally endorse (how else is peace going to be achieved across such a diverse world?).

Ultimately, human rights are a *project*, and projects require effort. The project was commenced because, in the 1940s, it made sense as the best way to try and tame government power, and put it to work in the service of human wellbeing.

Seven decades later, the project remains just as important. This is why human rights are not peripheral. They are not an optional extra. They are the core business of all governments.