Putting Rights Back into the Human Rights Consultation:
Why Politicians Have Too Much Power and Judges Need More

Speech at the NSW Young Lawyers Charter of Rights Conference, May 2009

Since the Federal Government announced its national consultation on human rights protection last year, there has been a startling lack of ambition and boldness amongst those who support a bill of rights for Australia. The dominant model on the table appears to be the weak “dialogue” statute found in Britain, Victoria and the ACT, under which there are no new causes of action, no remedial rights to compensation, and no power of judges to declare legislation inoperative where it is inconsistent with human rights.

Most advocates of bills of rights in Australia appear to be satisfied with this model (except those, such as the Australian Human Rights Commission, who are satisfied with their own even weaker model). Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in January 2009, Susan Ryan, chair of the Human Rights Act for Australia Campaign, responded to opponents of bills of rights who object that political power would be transferred to unelected judges:

> These arguments could only apply if a constitutional US-type bill was being proposed. But such a bill has been ruled out of the Government’s human rights consultation and ruled out by more than 70 community organisations in a human rights network I have been working with.¹

Strategically, as in the republican debate in the 1990s, a statutory dialogue model is attractive because a small target is thought more likely to gain wider political support. It seeks to neuter a widespread concern about out of touch judges usurping the role of a democratic parliament, instead of confronting such ill-informed fear-mongering head-on.

Yet, by failing to respond in a principled way to those criticisms, the supporters of a small target bill of rights lend dangerous legitimacy to the fallacies spouted by opponents of any bill of rights, who object to any new rights-based judicial powers – even dialogic ones. Those who ought to be at the forefront of developing progressive human rights protections have regrettably fettered themselves by a super abundance of caution, which does not well serve the cause of the strongest possible human rights protection in Australia.
Such a strategy renders arguments for a constitutional bill of rights heretical. It also marginalizes the next best thing: a justiciable statutory bill based (but improving) on the 1960 Canadian Bill of Rights, which could include ‘manner and form’ provisions to render inoperative federal legislation which conflicts with the rights contained in the Bill.²

I make four arguments here in response to the rather withered debate which has ensued on bills of rights in Australia over the past year or so. First, both those who oppose bills of rights and those who advocate a dialogue model do not adequately understand the value of rights as rights, rather than as mere political privileges. Secondly, a dialogue model gives us little more than we already have and is scarcely worth the effort, although of course it would be better than nothing at all.

Thirdly, the problem of human rights protection in Australia is that ‘unelected’ judges do not have enough power, and the ‘democratic’ parliament has too much. A justiciable bill of rights with enforceable remedies (whether constitutional or statutory) would not give unelected judges too much power. Fourthly, nor would such a bill require judges to apply vague or political standards which would politicise the judiciary. Far from it: empowering judges to better protect rights would enhance the legitimacy of the judiciary and increase public confidence in the justice system.

The Lack of Bold Vision of Rights Protection

Let me start with a stark comparison between the political commitment to human rights by the Rudd Government in Australia the Obama administration in the United States. In 2008, faced with the absence of a federal bill of rights for over a century since Federation, the Rudd Government announced a protracted inquiry into how to better protect rights in Australia, the recommendations of which will be considered by the Government towards the end of its first term, realistically consigning any implementation until after an election.

No strong leadership there: just part of the usual blizzard of inquiries and consultations launched by this government on a range of issues, with human rights treated no more significantly than petrol or grocery prices. While governing through long-winded inquiries might be seen as a strengthening of participatory democracy and consensus-building in the community, on the other hand there comes a point where inquiries begin to look like a strategy for deflecting difficult choices, and endless consultation wears thin.

Almost every other liberal democracy has had some form of bill of rights for decades, if not centuries; the legal issues are well known and not particularly difficult; there are a plethora of international treaties to guide the shape of a domestic bill; there have been numerous previous inquiries here and overseas about bills of rights; and one wonders what yet another inquiry can add, other than polarising political positions for and against a bill of rights.

In contrast to the typically Australian lethargy on a bill of rights, contrast the commitment embodied in President Obama’s Inaugural Address in January 2009:

...we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our founding fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the blood of generations. Those ideals still light up the world, and we will not give them up for expedience’s sake.
On that view, rights matter; they are not up for negotiation, compromise or long-winded consultation, only to result in (if anything) a weak statutory dialogue, or the even weaker model sanctioned by the Australian Human Rights Commission. It is self evident to the peoples of countries founded in ‘blood’ or violence that human rights should enjoy the strongest possible constitutional protection – whether the US emerging from revolutionary violence, Germany rebuilding itself from the excesses of Nazism, or South Africa overcoming systematic apartheid and racial discrimination.

The strong protection of rights is regarded as a key characteristic that signifies a break with the past and a shedding of the arbitrariness of the old order. I respectfully disagree with Professor Conor Gearty that insisting on constitutional rights protection is a kind of human rights fanaticism, or with David Kinley’s view that such assertions are a kind of simplistic polemic. In places where rights matter, they are grounded in the experience of systemic violations which have shown the peoples of those countries the importance of rights.

In contrast, those who have been most frequently victims of human rights abuses have never held the reigns of power in Australia: whether Asian or Pacific labourers at federation, indigenous Australians, asylum seekers, racial or religious minorities, the homeless, or now suspected terrorists.

Instead, our approach to rights has often been driven by a majoritarian conception of the common good, in which democracy is primarily concerned to protect ‘mainstream’ interests: the battlers, middle Australia, families, and so forth. No wonder many of our politicians are against rights or indifferent to them – most politicians do not come from those minority groups. We just don’t get it as those whose rights are systematically violated get it.

Look around the walls of this superb Dixon Room in the State Library of NSW: all of the paintings hanging here are based on the erasure of indigenous people from history. Look at that picture there, “The Founding of Australia”, with a First Fleet marine running the Union Jack up a flag pole at Sydney Cove, the sun shining, not an aborigine in sight. How can we say to those victims of rights violations, often invisible, often voiceless: “oh well, we had a dialogue about your rights but we still decided to override them, sorry”.

Some argue that parliament and the common law already protect rights, in which case one wonders why there is such staunch opposition to a bill of rights if it would simply positively reinforce the existing law. In a recent speech, Liberal Senator George Brandis used the High Court’s Al-Kateb case to illustrate that where there is a gap in human rights protection in Australia, a bill of rights is still unnecessary because “political action and law reform” fix it, as when detention laws were amended in response to that unsatisfactory decision.

But he evidently does not understand human rights well, or mischaracterises them: the government’s response to Al-Kateb did improve detention, but it still remains arbitrary under human rights law – it was just made less arbitrary. Every person arriving without immigration permission is still indiscriminately locked up, regardless of whether they are a flight risk, a security threat, or risk to public health. They are detained for up to 90 days, which unnecessary to identify them; in other democracies, it takes a few days or a week.
Our Parliament has decided that administrative convenience outweighs the right to liberty and freedom from arbitrary detention, which is precisely the kind of political interference which human rights law is designed to safeguard against. Similar judgments have been made by the parliament in the field of counter-terrorism law, anti-bikie legislation, and so on.

Of course, under a dialogic bill of rights, little would change: parliament could continue to override rights where it saw fit, particularly in a parliament which often does not appear to value liberty as highly as human rights law does. Democratic parliaments do not always get it right: sometimes they transgress what ought to be regarded as ultimate moral limits on political authority, and one cannot be confident in their chivalric powers of self-restraint.

**A Statutory Dialogue Model Does Not Give Us Much**

The first feature of a dialogue model is that it may require statutes to be interpreted consistently with human rights as far as possible. In large part, that is already supposed to happen: there is good legal authority that ambiguous statutes should be interpreted consistently with international law, particularly human rights (and the common law should also be developed consistently with international law where possible). So, little is gained through an express direction to that effect in a dialogue model, other than making human rights standards more familiar to those many judges who seem comfortable with statutes but who are suspicious or sceptical of, or untrained in, or unaware of, international law.

The second feature of a dialogue model is that it would enable courts to issue a declaration of incompatibility, where it is not possible to interpret the statute consistently with rights. Of course, most new legislation is already assessed in the arena of public debate according to human rights standards: a plethora of NGOs, academics and so on extensively analyse laws affecting rights in controversial areas according to human rights standards; parliamentary committee debates report on such matters and make recommendations; some parliamentarians think rights are important and others are not so persuaded. A declaration of incompatibility simply shifts the centre of gravity of the human rights debate about a law to the courts, in addition to whatever is going on in civil society and in parliament.

Now there is nothing wrong with an advisory opinion of that kind (and there are ways of ensuring they are constitutionally valid). A court’s declaration may send a powerful signal to the government that it has overstepped the mark, except that only procedural consequences follow (parliament must respond within a certain time period) and not any substantive obligation to change the law.

Sometimes a declaration may convince the government to change the law, and sometimes not; it depends on the political wind on the day, just as with Australia’s responses to the non-binding views of UN human rights treaty bodies. It requires governments to take seriously the non-binding but persuasive views of judges, to accord the ideal of rights due respect, and not to depart too readily from reasoned opinions about the impact of laws.

In a democracy in which parliamentarians have a heritage of framing legislative discussions around rights-based principles and value systems, where there is a political culture that is sympathetic to rights, one might have confidence that judicial declarations of this kind might have the desired effect.
In Australia, one is not so sure; there is such a deep rooted scepticism of international human rights amongst many politicians on both sides of the political spectrum; legislative debates are often quarantined from rights based considerations; quite a few politicians are openly hostile to them; and there is a prevailing attitude that parliament is democratic and that its views accordingly matter more than those of the courts, particularly because parliament can often overturn judicial decisions which it does not like.

Perhaps a dialogic charter would have the effect of civilising politics – one can only hope – and therein lies part of its value. But there is an equal chance that many politicians would continue to thumb their noses at such decisions – binding High Court decisions cop enough flack already, let alone decisions which have no binding effect and would therefore be likely to be accorded even less respect by some politicians.

The upshot is that the dialogue model is potentially – depending on its political reception – a fairly tepid or insipid way of protecting rights – it values them chiefly according to political preferences and priorities, rather than recognising their inherent importance, above the fray of political bargaining, horse trading, negotiation and opinion polls. Rights become transformed into rebuttable presumptions, blown about in the political winds.

In enabling parliament to override human rights where it wishes, the dialogue model gives us nothing more than an expanded form of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth), as we have seen it applied to the Northern Territory Intervention: rights are valuable only so long as they don’t get in the way of politics, which becomes the ultimate litmus test of what matters in society – not whether some rights are so important that they ought not to be overridden. Perversely, under the Victorian Charter, even freedom from torture is not regarded as absolute (as it is under international law), but rather can be suspended in the ordinary way by the override mechanism.

One redeeming quality of a dialogue model is its prevention function. The obligation it would impose on public servants (and why not private actors? This limitation too reflects the lack of ambition of its proponents) to comply with human rights standards is arguably more important to the daily business of government than whether any legal consequences (such as compensation) flow from violations.

Requiring people (whether policy officers or fisheries inspectors) to think about protecting rights in their interactions can only improve human rights protection. From an administrative law point of view, it involves a better structuring of the proper considerations which ought to be taken into account in the exercise of (public) power, many of which are already part and parcel of good public administration.

**Parliamentary Sovereignty Is Not Threatened**

Senator Brandis asserted the old furphy in March 2009 that a justiciable bill of rights “would inevitably result in a fundamental rebalancing of our constitution away from parliament towards the judiciary, with dangerous consequences for both”, and a “significant transfer of power from elected Parliaments to unelected judges”.
Yet, it has never been the case under the Australian Constitution that sovereignty is vested exclusively in the parliament. Doctrinally that is what sets Australian democracy apart from its British ancestor: with an unwritten constitution, the absolute sovereignty or supremacy of parliament was a defining characteristic of classic English constitutionalism.

That was never the case in Australia, where the drafters of our Washminster constitution deliberately departed from that model by limiting the sovereignty of parliament in various ways: not only by closely defining the powers, functions and authority of the parliament to legislate, but also by decentralising power in a separation of powers which was more rigid than its British counterpart, including by vesting certain powers exclusively in the judiciary.

The point of the separation of powers is *the division or sharing of sovereignty*: majoritarian democracy only protects human beings so far; it is the constraints or limitations on power accepted by democracies that enable democracy to flourish and sustain itself over time, in a manner which is inclusive of all and not premised on the arbitrary exclusions or unequal treatment of groups that the majority does not like.

Further, David Feldman has responded to criticisms of the judiciary’s lack of democratic legitimacy by arguing that legitimacy can arise independently from democracy. Judicial decisions gain their own legitimacy from reference to relatively clear and predictable legal standards and the independence of courts from political processes. In addition, in my view courts derive legitimacy from their constitutional role in constraining the arbitrary or unlawful exercise of power, a role entrusted to the courts through our democratic constitutional settlement.

There is nothing inherent or innate about the respective roles of the legislature and the courts: the separation of powers is a dynamic and fluid doctrine which does and is capable of changing according to the prevailing needs of society. A democracy may properly elect to assign certain powers of restraint to the judiciary, including through a constitutional bill or a justiciable statutory model, because it is rightly sceptical of overly broad legislative power.

**Rights Are Not Too Vague or Political For Judges**

It is often further asserted that human rights standards are wide, vague or ambiguous, admitting a range of possibilities which demands the making of political choices. As Senator Brandis puts it, they are “expressed at such a level of generality that often they amount to little more than political slogans”. Yet, rights are only general if one lacks a body of law that gives them content, which is obviously the case in a country which lacks a bill of rights.

The obvious answer to this tedious objection is that Australia could readily draw upon the rich vein of international and comparative jurisprudence from those many democracies which directly apply human rights. This is incidentally an important reason why any Australian bill ought not to depart from the accepted language of international treaties, so that the jurisprudence can assist in providing relative certainty in an Australian context.

It is often further objected that because rights are so vague and indeterminate, they transfer to judges subjective control over what should be political choices, and that judges lack expertise in such policy-based decision making or discretionary balancing of interests.
Yet, this criticism equally applies to many other well-accepted legal concepts applied by the courts, such as tests of reasonableness, equity, fairness, justice and so forth, which mask broad discretionary power, yet which have long been accepted as the work of judges. This objection is grounded in a fundamental misunderstanding of the judicial function, which in reality involves the exercise of a range of different discretions, rather than the automatic or technical application of precise and limited legal rules.

There are plenty of wide discretions which already exist under statute or the common law and which judges routinely apply. For instance, in the High Court’s anti-terrorism control orders case, *Thomas v Mowbray* [2007], Gleeson CJ observed (at paras 19-27) that the common law, constitutional law, contract, real property, and trade practices commonly use concepts of reasonableness and proportionality (concepts which are incidentally at the heart of human rights law reasoning) and which are not “inherently too vague for use in judicial decision-making”.

Parliament can equally be criticised for being an inappropriate forum for making certain policy decisions about human rights, for example, because political pressures render parliaments more susceptible to trading away individual rights to appease the majoritarian clamour; because legislators are susceptible to NGO or lobbyist pressure which distorts outcomes; or because party politicians are beholden to sectarian interests, whether big business or trade unions or green groups.

Senator Brandis also objects that the wide policy choices which judges would be required to make would politicise the judiciary and undermine the courts’ reputation for neutrality. Yet conversely, the failure of the courts to remedy rights violations already exposes it to greater ridicule and contempt: many Australians were deeply ashamed that our High Court was forced into accepting that indefinite detention without charge could arise under an Australian statute, and that our constitutional court was powerless to prevent it.

Likewise, a law to the detriment of any race could potentially be perfectly constitutional under our Constitution’s ‘race’ power, which never ceases to astound visitors from other democracies where the prospect of systematic racial discrimination has been unthinkable ever since the Nazis were defeated.

**Politicians Have Too Much Power and Judges Have Too Little**

We have not yet achieved the optimal division of powers between politicians and judges in respect of the fundamental protection of human beings. The depth of hostility towards incorporating international human rights standards into Australian law is perplexing. Human rights are *minimum* standards only – *a floor not a ceiling* – and that is why suggestions that they interfere in democratic politics are so odious. Democracies should in most cases be performing *far above* the minimum standards. When they are not, something is going seriously wrong in those political communities.

One problem in the framing of objections to bills of rights generally in Australia is that the arguments are too often couched in the abstract, as a simple assertion that rights are vague, ambiguous, political, best decided by parliament and so on. There is seldom specific attention to why codifying particular rights would be problematic.
For instance, I believe that parliament should never be entitled to torture a person, and I believe that a judge properly ought to have power to forbid it and to compensate victims.

I believe that an Australian court ought to be able to order the government to provide public housing for those who are living homeless and destitute on the streets. I cannot believe that this would impose undue interference in resource distribution priorities by the government, since avoidance of destitution is surely a minimum duty of any functioning government. If we can afford to spend $100 billion on new defence procurements at a time of global financial crisis, we can surely afford to put a roof over the head of everyone who needs it – if we agree that rights are rights, and not vague and tradeable political commodities.

Likewise I believe that a court ought to be able to prevent the government from imposing punitive visa conditions on a person which deny them income and housing support, medical care, and work rights, thus leaving them destitute and treating them in an inhuman and degrading manner. I believe it should not matter that they are not Australian citizens.

Further, I believe that a court should be able to order the release of a person from an immigration detention centre when they have been detained there purely for administrative convenience, and not because they pose any risk to anyone. I think it is reasonable to expect any government not to detain a person arbitrarily and without strong justification.

Equally I believe that the parliament should not interfere arbitrarily in freedom of expression, as it has done in counter-terrorism reforms to sedition and classification laws, and that a judge ought to be able to provide a remedy for such interference. The sedition offences, for example, prohibit certain incitements even where it has no likelihood or probability of actually resulting in the violence incited, and which would be incompatible with the US constitutional law test for the protection of free speech.

Once you drill down into the specific rights in question, much of what is claimed to involve heated political contestation evaporates – precisely because so much of human rights law is about minimum, not maximum standards. The zone of disputation is surprisingly narrow if the debate is discussed at the right-by-right level, rather than rhetorically or polemically.

Certainly the protection of some rights involves difficult resource allocation choices, in which governments are typically better experienced than courts. Yet, as the South African experience demonstrates, it is possible to balance these interests by giving courts powers in relation to rights while simultaneously ensuring that the courts only require governments to do what is reasonable within prevailing resource limits and policy constraints. Such an approach was recently endorsed by the UK Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights in 2007-08.

**Conclusion**

I would caution against settling for a weak dialogue model of human rights protection. Its weaknesses cannot possibly satisfy those to whom human rights matter most – those who are victims of rights violations, and who are seldom well positioned (unlike business, lobbyists, trade unions and so forth) to engage in the political process to extract concessions.
The litmus test of any government’s commitment to human rights is its preparedness to expend political capital to secure fundamental changes, which may not necessarily appeal to majoritarian sentiment, or to the usual cacophony of shock jocks and ideologues. Political capital is greatest in the government’s first term, while it is still popular and has not started the slide into decline, as governments eventually do as they accumulate mistakes over time.

The government has an unprecedented chance not only to put right what was so out of balance under the previous government, but to show real leadership in developing a progressive human rights agenda in Australia. It should not waste that opportunity by delaying on the question of a bill of rights, or by settling for an insipid dialogue (or worse, for an even weaker Australian Human Rights Commission model).

The government might be pleasantly surprised by how warmly a justiciable or constitutional bill of rights might be received in the community, if one is willing to look beyond the thousands of tedious form letters for and against human rights which have been mobilised by advocacy groups. The state and territory consultative processes have shown overwhelming support, while the previous government’s intransigence on human rights accounts for part of the public’s turn against it – and against the belief that parliament or a dialogue model is an adequate guarantor of our liberty.

Notes

4 See Grootboom v Oostenberg Municipality and Others, 2000 (11) BCLR 1169 (CC); 2001 (1) SA 46 (CC).