

# Hope and Disillusionment in Geneva

*Bridi Rice Experiences the Highs and Lows of Diplomatic Life as a Castan Centre Global Intern*

By Bridi Rice

Being an Australian Delegate at the United Nations Human Rights Council is as much about politics as it is about law and human rights. It's also about being a diplomat and I can't say that I've worked out what that is yet.

Australia has a Permanent Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. It was here that I spent two months with a team of Australian diplomats, representing Australia and the world's interests on the newly formed Council. Sounds *cutting edge*, and indeed it was. But some days, it felt more as though we were on a *knife's edge*. Fighting for human rights in the field I understand: you want to stop a government from persecuting its citizens, you want to stop a conflict, you fight for the right of a child to attend school, for a woman's autonomy. Fighting for human rights wearing a suit and drinking a cocktail in one of the world's wealthiest cities is a different game. I call it national interest ping pong.

The Council consists of member states, observer states and groups of interested parties such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Most State delegations are made up of career diplomats with little human rights experience. In one case, someone's 'really important niece who hadn't been home in 15 years' sat at the front of her country's delegation. It was therefore a treat to find that Austria had an ex-peacekeeper in its delegation and damn near extraordinary that the Israeli delegation comprised a career human rights lawyer from the US.

So what happens at the Council when member states include some of the world's greatest human rights violators, and many countries vote according to their regional group line? What happens when the only people who have ever seen a human rights violation are the maligned Human Rights Watch and Amnesty Internationals of this world? What happens when you, as a 22 year old Australian who is firmly 'misaligned' with current Australian government human rights policy find yourself on the world's human rights plat-



*Bridi delivers a speech to the Council on behalf of Australia.*

form? You have an existential crisis romantically similar to that of Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Outsider*.

Sitting in a room with delegates whose countries you have visited and worked in, listening to their vast self-appraisals, makes your blood curdle at their denial of reality. Sitting in a room where delegates deny discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual preferences makes you think of gay and lesbian friends back home. Sitting in a room as Amnesty International delivers 23,000 postcards addressed to your government requesting the release of David Hicks from Guantanamo Bay requires self control to put it mildly.

This existential crisis can make you ashamed, frustrated, angry and want to turn your back on your idealistic dreams of making the world a better place. Or, it can be the best damn signal you can receive that you're doing the right thing.

Questioning what your nation is about and what you are about, and openly considering the perspectives other than our own is vital. It is vital for our world to overcome our defensive and polarised negotiating positions in Geneva. It is vital that we start learning. And so, learn I did.

The Council is a political organ – and my jury is out on whether it can ever be an effective one. One thing is certain though, it will be a near sighted world that will allow the Council to be hamstrung by the ping pong game it is currently playing. It is my hope that the Council, with the suggestions made in the Universal Periodic Review mechanism will open itself to human rights expertise beyond what its diplomats can offer. It is my hope that it engages in constructive and meaningful dialogue. It is my greatest hope that, if the Council does not do these things, it comes under intense global scrutiny and criticism.

Working in Geneva was sensational. There is no doubt. As a 22 year old, to sit behind a little white sign whose black letters spell the French, 'Australie' and deliver a speech striking out against child prostitution and pornography and the use of child soldiers in Sri Lanka was what every young human rights advocate dreams of. To spend evenings attending speeches and calls to action from some of the world's greatest human rights workers is simultaneously heartbreaking and inspiring.

Undoubtedly Australia's representatives to the UN are amongst the most professional and well regarded diplomats Geneva has to offer. And, by and large, whether agreeing or disagreeing with Australia's position on particular human rights concerns, our diplomats are a thoughtful, considered and far-sighted lot who work in an intensely frustrating negotiating context. I return to my original musing about what a diplomat is, and I must say, I have no further conclusion. But, if it includes being part of trying to build a better international mechanism to protect and promote human rights, then giving it a go for a while has been nothing but an honour and hopefully a taste of what will be more to come.