

In fact, in 1981 we had home ownership levels up to 73.4 per cent. But since 1981 we have seen year after year of decline in the percentage of Australians who own their own homes. It is now down to 67 per cent. If we look at that in numbers, that equates to some 500,000—half a million—Australian households that no longer own their own home. There are many reasons why this has happened, and one of those reasons is the superannuation system. If we are asking people to take nine per cent of their income and put it away in compulsory superannuation, that is less money they have to put towards a deposit on a house. That is why we are seeing this decline, and also a decline in the number of people who have finance for small business. Many small business people use their home as collateral to get themselves started, but if they have not got a deposit to get themselves into the market then they not only lock themselves out of homeownership but also lock themselves out of small business ownership.

Two important provisos about using superannuation: firstly, we have to increase the supply of housing in this country. We have to simply release more land. To give you an idea of the situation at the moment: if we were to depopulate the entire mainland of Australia and move everyone to Tasmania—if every single man, woman and child moved to Tasmania—we could give every single household a one-acre block and we would only use up half of Tasmania. We could use the rest for national parks and for industry. With a one-acre block, every single household in Australia could fit into Tasmania. The other proviso is that, if we allow people to use their superannuation for a deposit on their home, it has to work the same at the back end. So if a deposit is used as a draw-down, they have to also use, later on, the equity that they have in their home to help fund their retirement. It makes perfect sense. We need to have this debate. Our superannuation system is currently working against homeowners, and we must reverse that decline and increase homeownership in this country.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Irons):** The member's time has expired. In accordance with standing order 193 the time for members' constituency statements has concluded.

## PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

### Baha'is in Iran

**Ms BRODTMANN (Canberra) (11:01):** I move:

That this House:

- (1) notes the widespread and systematic campaign of persecution of Baha'is in Iran, with more than 110 Baha'is currently imprisoned due to their religious beliefs;
- (2) condemns the treatment of Baha'is in Iran, which includes economic and educational discrimination, strict limits on the right to assemble and worship, as well as the threat of raids, arrests and detention or imprisonment;
- (3) commends the recent resolution by the United Nations General Assembly in which it expressed its 'deep concern at serious ongoing and recurring human rights violations' in Iran; and
- (4) calls for an end to the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran.

I rise today to move this motion concerning the widespread and systematic campaign of persecution of Baha'is in Iran, and I thank the member for Parkes for seconding it. This is of significant concern to the Baha'i community in my electorate of Canberra, and I am very pleased that so many of them could join us here today for this discussion on this motion.

The Baha'i faith is a peaceful faith that was founded over 150 years ago and has been present in Australia since 1920. According to the Australian Baha'i community, the faith's central theme is that humanity is one family and that the time has come for its unification into a peaceful global society. It advocates equality and it advocates education. There are more than five million followers around the world, and they come from all backgrounds and can be found in virtually every country on earth. Many can be found in my electorate of Canberra, as the ACT Baha'i centre is located in Weston.

The community here in Canberra began in 1951, and on 21 April 1957 the community became firmly established with the election of its first local spiritual assembly, a local governing council elected by Baha'is in every locality where there are nine or more members. The community here in Canberra has continued to grow steadily and contributes in many ways to the city. From the mid-1980s, the diversity of the community was enhanced by the arrival of Baha'i refugees from Iran, who settled in Canberra. Today the community is made up of individuals with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, reflecting Canberra's multicultural diversity.

Since becoming the member for Canberra, I have been involved in a number of events organised by the Canberra Baha'i community. Just last month I attended a film screening of *To Light a Candle*, which looks at the situation in which the Baha'is in Iran find themselves. It was this event and also my ongoing history on this issue from my time in DFAT and the many conversations I have had that have prompted me to move this motion.

Iran has been actively persecuting Baha'is for the last 30 years, and in 2008 it imprisoned the entire governing body of Baha'is. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Baha'is have been systematically persecuted as a matter of government policy. During the first decade of this persecution, more than 200 Baha'is were killed or executed, hundreds more were tortured or imprisoned, and tens of thousands lost jobs, access to education and other rights—all solely because of their religious belief. Since 2005 more than 700 Baha'is have been arrested, and there are currently more than 100 imprisoned, including all seven members of a former leadership group serving the Baha'i community of Iran, as I mentioned earlier.

But the human rights violations do not stop there. Baha'is in Iran are also subjected to other types of persecution, including economic discrimination, strict limits on the right to assemble and worship, and the broadcasting of anti-Baha'i propaganda in the government-led media. Since 2005, more than 49 Baha'i-owned properties have been the target of arsonists, with not one person arrested, and then there was the terrible desecration of the cemetery in Shiraz last year.

One aspect of their persecution which speaks particularly strongly to me is the way they are denied access to higher education. Baha'is in Iran are prohibited from going to university and are blocked from entering many professions. This is a human rights violation of the worst kind, as Baha'is are relegated to a life of poverty, underdevelopment and oppression.

I join those around the world calling on Iran to abide by its international human rights obligations. I condemn the ongoing human rights violations in Iran and call upon the Islamic Republic of Iran to ensure that the rights of all individuals are fully protected without discrimination, and that it fulfils its obligations to its own citizens as set out in the Iranian Constitution. I also commend the UN General Assembly for recently approving a resolution expressing deep concern about serious, ongoing and recurring human rights violations in Iran.

It is encouraging to see Iran engaging more actively with the West and normalising its relationship with the West. It is encouraging too to see President Rouhani's push for reform and call to end international isolation. As part of its reform and as part of its engagement with the West, I call on Iran to put an end to the widespread and systematic persecution of Baha'is. I am pleased to see that so many of my colleagues have joined me in this motion calling for an end to the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran.

**The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Irons):** I thank the member. I also take this opportunity to acknowledge and welcome the presence of the Baha'i community in the Federation Chamber. Is the motion seconded?

**Mr COULTON** (Parkes—The Nationals Chief Whip) (11:06): I am honoured to second this motion, and I thank my colleague the member for Canberra for bringing this motion to the House today. In Australia there are a few things that we fundamentally believe in as the base for our society—freedom of religion, equal rights for women and the opportunity that education provides all citizens. It is for these very same reasons that the Baha'is in Iran are now being persecuted. As the member for Canberra said, this has been going on for 30 years since the revolution that took place in that country at that time.

Australia absolutely abhors this type of treatment. I have had meetings with several ministers of foreign affairs in the previous government and in the current government, and I know from conversations with them that not only have the Australian government and the Australian people been lobbying the Iranian officials in this country but also our embassy and our officials in Iran have been talking about the plight of the Baha'is in Iran.

Recently, the United Nations Secretary-General's human rights report on Iran again reported incitement targeting the Baha'i faith and its adherents, and the destruction of sites of religious and cultural value. It is through the General Assembly of the United Nations that we have to continue this fight.

The issues surrounding the persecution of Baha'is was first brought to me several years ago by one of my constituents, Nasser Sedghi. Nasser is a Baha'i from Iran who has made his home in Dubbo and is a very well regarded and much loved citizen of that town. It is not without some irony that the people of Dubbo probably know more about the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran than many other citizens around Australia. This is particularly important for Nasser. His older brother Farhad encouraged Nasser to gain an education and encouraged him to make a new life for himself. He was able to do that because of the education that he gained. He is a very successful businessman in Dubbo at the moment. But four years ago Farhad Sedghi was arrested as part of a general sweep of people that were running the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education. Nasser's crime was to be taking part in educating people in Iran, that had been forbidden by the government.

One of the reasons that Nasser found himself as an academic undertaking education of others was that he was pretty well precluded from the workforce. He had a responsible job as an accountant in a large firm, but because of his faith he was sacked from that position, and so, in an attempt to make sure that others could receive an education and have the opportunities that he and his family had, he was involved in the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education.

It is hard to believe that in the 21st century we have this sort of persecution taking place. It is something that we read about happening in the dark past and in the dark ages, but this is happening as we speak today. People are being imprisoned not for committing a crime but for their belief in education and equal rights for women, and their support of a religion that only preaches peace and goodwill to their fellow man.

I am very pleased to be part of this motion today and I would encourage my colleagues in this parliament to support it. As a government we need to continue, directly through our representatives from Iran here in Australia and through the UN General Assembly, to keep the issue of the Baha'is that are behind bars in Iran at the forefront, and to make sure that they are free and able to practise their peaceful religion, as they are entitled to do.

**Mr LAURIE FERGUSON** (Werriwa) (11:11): It is very telling that this is not the first occasion on which this matter has come before the federal parliament. In fact, it is one of the string of motions that people on both sides of the parliament have addressed over the 20 years that I have been in this parliament. This stretches to 1979, when the house of Bab was destroyed in Shiraz, and we can trace an incident where the Baha'u'llah's father's residence in Tehran was destroyed. There was the execution of over 200 Baha'is, and as mentioned earlier, the 2008 arrest of the entire leadership.

As announced by the mover, this is a religion that emphasises global solutions. In my old electorate, I attended every year an event on the international Human Rights Day, which was organised by the Holroyd Baha'i community. It was not to propagandise about their own situation; it was to make sure that the world understood these very important principles.

Iran itself campaigns around the world—and quite rightly in some cases—for the Shiah majority in Bahrain, about their lack of rights and their suppression. They speak of the persecution of the Houthi minority in Saudi Arabia. They have understandable fears for the Alawites, if ever the regime in Syria falls, and they have quite rightly raised the underrepresentation of the very significant Shiah population in Lebanese politics. On an international front, they raise the condition and the rights of their religious confederates, some of which are for reasons of international politics often ignored. It is thus ironic that within Iran we see systematic persecution of the Baha'is and ethnic minorities such as Kurds and Azeris, people incarcerated for practising theosophy, women arrested for campaigning for human rights, people jailed for criticising very questionable election results and a whole plethora of other people executed and incarcerated. Of course the Baha'is have been very active around this matter in this country, and that is why, of all the persecuted groups, they are the one that most often comes before this parliament.

We see no real improvement. In late 2013 the United Kingdom's Foreign & Commonwealth Office said Iran 'has not substantially improved its human rights'. It has been the subject of consistent criticism by the UN special rapporteur, Ahmed Shaheed, who late last year spoke of no improvement. It is a situation that has been constantly criticised by the credible international organisation, Human Rights Watch. It has been the subject of a vote in the United Nations in 2013, which expressed deep concerns. We all know how difficult it is to mobilise UN resolutions criticising any country party to the United Nations, so the fact that that was carried 86 to 36 is indicative of how serious problems are there. Most recently, in August 2014 reports found that there were insufficient trial safeguards and inadequate access to legal counsel. Interviewees stated that lawyers refused to take their cases due to the fact that there would be reprisals against them for defending Baha'is and other religious minorities. Despite Iran accepting nine recommendations from the United Nations Human Rights Council, including commitments to uphold freedom of belief and religion and combat incitement, we can say with a great degree of confidence that there is a process of state-instigated discrimination against Baha'is.

As we have seen, there is an inability of Baha'i practitioners to get an education in the country. That is always a crucial need for minority groups in any society, whether they be Jews, Tamils, Palestinians or refugee groups around the world. For these people, education is often the only option, because other areas are cut off. But education is denied to Baha'is.

We have talked about the way in which their leadership has been constantly decimated and the way religious things that matter to them are being constantly destroyed. Iran would be the first country in the world to deplore ISIL's destruction of other religious sites in Iraq or Syria, but they see no inconsistency in destroying and suppressing another religious group. I commend the movers of this motion. I hope it will not be a resolution that will be moved here for the next 20 years. I hope that international pressure and the need for Iran to try and reach some accommodation with the West over nuclear weapons and other facets will increase the possibility of change.

**Mr GOODENOUGH** (Moore) (11:16): I support this motion moved by the member for Canberra calling for an end to the systematic persecution of Baha'is in Iran. The freedom to practise one's chosen religion is a fundamental right that forms the core of our democratic system in Australia. Our society allows freedom of

religion free from persecution, intimidation and harassment. It is our sincere hope that international religious tolerance will spread.

It is estimated that there are currently more than 110 Baha'is imprisoned in Iran due to their religious beliefs. Over the years Baha'is have endured persecution and atrocities including economic and educational discrimination, imprisonment, torture, restrictions on their right to free assembly, raids, arrests, vandalism and violence—and even paying the ultimate sacrifice of death. Since 2005 it is estimated that more than 710 Baha'is in Iran have been arrested and detained.

It is incumbent upon us as elected representatives in a free society to call upon foreign governments around the world, including countries such as Iran, to respect freedom of religion and allow their citizens to worship peaceably with tolerance. In raising public awareness of this issue it is hoped that world attention will be focussed on addressing this grave injustice.

There is a strong Baha'i community in Western Australia, in particular in the northern suburbs of Perth. I have been fortunate enough to meet a number of Baha'is living in my electorate and in the surrounding areas. The first member I was introduced to was Mr Mehran Zare, a local businessman, who made mention of his Baha'i faith. At first I did not know much about their beliefs, faith or history. But soon after, prominent members of the Baha'i community invited me along with my colleague the member for Cowan to attend a cultural performance in the auditorium at Hale School, which was filled to capacity. The production provided a comprehensive overview of the Baha'i faith and culture through music and on-stage drama.

Subsequently, I was invited along with Senator Michaelia Cash to a dinner with key members of the local Baha'i community hosted at the home of Mr Ali and Mrs Faith Habibi, where I had the opportunity to engage in conversation over a dinner of delicious homemade cuisine. During the evening an informative documentary on DVD was screened which provided a concise overview of the Baha'i history, faith and beliefs, and the persecution faced in Iran and other countries. I later reciprocated this hospitality by inviting Baha'i assembly members to my office for a roundtable discussion, so I am pleased to be able to have the opportunity to contribute to this parliamentary debate in support of the Baha'i community.

Through my association with the local Baha'i community over a number of years, I have observed its members to be very peaceful, tolerant, and family oriented. The religion could not be described as fundamentalist or extremist in nature—rather, it is very moderate in nature. As I have become more familiar with individual members, I have come to realise that they value education very highly, with many members having postgraduate qualifications and having built professional careers in fields such as business, engineering, medicine and academia. I note that a number of senior positions at my local Edith Cowan University are currently filled by prominent Baha'is.

What greatly impresses me generally about the Baha'i community in Australia is the ability of its members to integrate and assimilate into Australian society by fully and actively participating in the development and advancement of our nation. By being inclusive, cooperative, and participative they have made the most of the opportunities presented to them, settled in and been embraced by their fellow Australians. The value they have placed on education, professional achievement and family values has seen them prosper in their new country.

In supporting this motion for an end to the systematic persecution of Baha'is by the government of Iran, and more broadly an end to the persecution of Baha'is by governments across the world, I urge all governments to consider the potential contributions that can be made to society by allowing the Bahai's to freely practise their religion. *(Time expired)*

**Ms PARKE** (Fremantle) (11:21): I thank the member for Canberra for moving this motion and for the opportunity to speak about the deteriorating situation that confronts the Baha'i people of Iran, who continue to be subject to terrible persecution. Like the member for Moore before me, I too am fortunate to have many Baha'i practitioners in my electorate of Fremantle, and I also welcome members of the Baha'i community of Canberra to the parliament. It is disappointing that the range and severity of the discriminatory treatment of Baha'is in Iran has worsened since the time I moved a motion on this subject in 2012, and that we find ourselves standing here yet again giving voice to the plight of the Baha'is in their struggle to be accorded fundamental human rights.

At the most recent Universal Periodic Review relating to Iran, held at the Human Rights Council in Geneva at the end of October 2014, Iran's representative stated that Baha'is enjoy all citizenship rights. This is completely contradicted by the evidence and ignores the exclusion of Baha'is from protection under Iran's constitution, which makes plain that the 'human political, economic, social, and cultural rights' afforded to Iranian citizens must be 'in conformity with Islamic criteria.' Despite promises made by the new president, Mr Hassan Rouhani, in relation to improving the observance of basic human rights in Iran, there has been no change in the persecution faced by the Baha'is. In fact, oppression of Baha'is intensified all over the country in 2014—intelligence officials heightened

their use of violence during home searches and arrests; coordinated raids were conducted to arrest groups in different localities; and today more than 100 Baha'is remain imprisoned as a direct consequence of their religious beliefs—including the seven Baha'i leaders imprisoned since May 2008.

Officials have implemented discriminatory policies in an increasingly methodical way over the past 18 months, blocking access to higher education, business and trade, in addition to suppressing the social and cultural life for those of the Baha'i faith. Recently, 81 stores belonging to Baha'is were sealed by the authorities in four different localities merely for being closed in observance of Baha'i holy days. All this shows there is a clear intent to isolate, impoverish, and constrain the Baha'i people, with a powerful encouragement for them to leave their own country.

Despite this persecution, and contrary to the Iranian authority's view that the Baha'is are secretly plotting a Zionist overthrow, the Baha'is remain committed to contributing to the peaceful advancement of their homeland by maintaining their faith and refusing to be subjugated. Among these brave people are Mr Danial Owji, who now resides in Western Australia having fled Iran following his persecution for involvement with the Baha'i Institute of Higher Learning. Danial's experience was recorded by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Iran in a March 2013 report that states:

On May 22, 2011, 15 teachers and administrators of the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) were allegedly arrested. Later that night, Mr. Danial Owji a student and volunteer at the BIHE, while driving was reportedly stopped on his street by plainclothes agents, tasered, handcuffed, blindfolded, put in the trunk of his car, and driven away. Mr. Owji was allegedly taken to an unknown location, that appeared to be a official place of detention, where he was interrogated and physically tortured over the course of four days, including being punched, kicked, suspended from the ceiling by his arms, handcuffed in stress positions, having cigarettes extinguished on his body, and being flogged on his feet. Mr. Owji was held in a bathroom rather than a cell. During his interrogations before his release, Mr. Owji was pressured to sign a document saying he was a participant in the Baha'i university, helped propagate it electronically, cooperated with the Zionist entity, taught classes, would testify against specific professors, and that the administration of school was conducted from the Baha'i facilities in Haifa, Israel in cooperation with the Zionist regime. Mr. Owji was allegedly harassed following his release as he sought legal redress for his mistreatment. When he received a summons from the Revolutionary Court approximately a year after his arrest, Mr. Owji fled the country.

Sadly, there are many more stories like Danial's filling UN reports and the records of organisations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

This week at the UN Human Rights Council, Iran will be indicating which of the recommendations made during its 2014 UPR it intends to accept. The record of the past four years shows that Iranian authorities have failed to implement the recommendations accepted during its first review.

I urge Iran—a once great nation, as I have previously said in this place; a cradle of civilisation and of culture, and a place with a historical respect for education—to finally abide by its commitment to the International Bill of Human Rights. Iran's Constitution, in Article 23, already recognises that: 'The investigation of individuals' beliefs is forbidden, and no-one may be molested or taken to task simply for holding a certain belief.' Iran could simply put this article into practice by allowing Baha'is to participate fully in Iranian society.

Ending this long period of discrimination and repression would allow the Iranian government to make progress on the path to a peaceful, principled and tolerant state— (*Time expired*)

**Mr SIMPKINS** (Cowan) (11:27): The challenge of going last in a debate like this is to try to find an excellent point that has not already been made and made very well by all speakers today. I do, however, acknowledge Natalie Mobini for her assistance in the last few days and the members of the Baha'i community here in Canberra.

It does seem like we have been here before, and certainly in my travels in the world, when I have been fortunate enough to go overseas, I have seen persecution in many places. Whatever happens here in this place in these debates, we need to acknowledge that, down there on the ground, people are living the challenges of this every day. And it is not just in recent times, either. The Baha'i community has been persecuted since 1844, from the origins of their faith.

Our mutual friend Mehran Zare from Perth has told me on many occasions about his flight from Iran. It was something like 30 years ago when he was at school that he was taken from a classroom, because he was a Baha'i, taken out into the snow and had his hand held under the snow; the boot of one of the staff of this school held his hand under the snow for two hours—a terrible act of torture against a child. But this is the day-to-day life of people of the Baha'i faith in Iran.

Although persecution has been a constant part of the existence of the Baha'is since the origins of their faith—and we know that that is the case—since 1979 the Islamic Republic of Iran has been responsible for great torture and persecution. It has been described as alienating or keeping people away from education and stopping them from entering universities, and then arresting those who tried to set up a Baha'i university as well. This is

systematic; there is no doubt about it. Billions of dollars of property has been seized since the revolution in 1979. It is a wonder to me, and a great indication of the courage and the resolute nature of Baha'i people, that there are still 300,000 of them left in Iran. What brave people they are. I can understand that so many have had to find a better life elsewhere, and it is great that they have found that better life. Many have found that better life here in Australia. It is a great indication to me of how brave and strong the people who remain behind in Iran are.

I have no time for the regime there in any regard, whether it is creating a nuclear program, the killing of apostates or the persecution of the Baha'is and other minorities in their country. I have no faith, no confidence in the Iranian regime. I know that so many of the recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review of human rights in 2010 came to nothing. Very few of the recommendations were accepted. Those that were accepted were hardly carried through with at all. We know that on Thursday there will be Iran's response to the 2014 recommendations. There are 291 recommendations and we will see what they do with that. But I tell you this: in the circumstance where a religion is not even acknowledged as a minority within the constitution of that bureaucracy, I have little faith that they will either acknowledge the concerns of the international community or even act on them at all.

It is important that, whatever we do in this country, we keep talking about this. I know the Minister for Foreign Affairs has raised it with Iran and our embassy in Tehran has also raised it. We must continue to raise it at every opportunity. It should be part of the furniture. Part of every discussion we have with countries like Iran should be to raise this issue of the human rights of people over there, particularly the Baha'is, a long-suffering but very brave people. We should always keep them in our prayers and close to our hearts, because they certainly deserve our greatest respect.

Debate adjourned.

### **International Mother Language Day**

**Ms VAMVAKINO** (Calwell) (11:32): I move:

That this House:

(1) notes that:

(a) since 1999, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has recognised International Mother Language Day (MILD) on 21 February;

(b) on 16 May 2007 the United Nations General Assembly in its resolution A/RES/61/266 called upon Member States 'to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world';

(c) MILD has been observed every year since its inception to promote linguistic and cultural diversity and multilingualism; and

(d) 21 February represents the day in 1952 when students demonstrating for recognition of their language, Bangla (as one of the two national languages of the then Pakistan), were shot and killed by police in Dhaka, the capital of what is now Bangladesh;

(2) recognises:

(a) the importance of languages and their benefits in the broader Australian community;

(b) that languages are the most powerful instruments for preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage; and

(c) that all moves to promote the dissemination of mother tongues will serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education but to develop fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue;

(3) acknowledges and commends the Speak Greek in March campaign;

(4) acknowledges that the Speak Greek in March campaign aims to encourage the greater use of the Greek language at home, in the month of March; and

(5) in collaboration with relevant organisations of the Greek community, undertakes a campaign to establish March as the month during which individuals and organisations endeavour to conduct most of their communications at home and in public in the Greek language.

**Ms VAMVAKINO**: My motion acknowledges UNESCO's recognition of 21 February as International Mother Language Day. On 16 May 2007, the United Nations general assembly resolved to promote the preservation and protection of all languages used by peoples of the world. Since then, International Mother Language Day has been marked with a wide range of activities that promote linguistic and cultural diversity. Happily, we are seeing an increase of such activities here in Australia.

Language is much more than an instrument for communication. It is also the main carrier for one's inheritance and the core source for ethnic and cultural identity. Our multilingual world would be better appreciated if we all had a greater understanding of our linguistic and cultural traditions. According to the 2011 census, there are about