**UN human rights reform vital**

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By: Editorial Board

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Australia’s election to membership of the controversial, 47-nation UN Human Rights Council is a significant success for Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and the protracted global campaign waged by our diplomats to win the seat. There should be no illusion about the challenge we face, however, in achieving what Ms Bishop has rightly identified as one of our main goals in joining: achieving long-overdue reform of a body whose hypocritically pontificating membership includes some of the world’s most egregious human rights abusers, ever ready to point fingers at others. States such as Venezuela, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, China and Egypt have helped ensure, as US ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley has pointed out, the council’s focus is perpetually on denouncing the purported human rights depredations of one country, Israel. At the same time, the council has been far less concerned about atrocities such as the bloodbaths in Syria and Yemen and the plight of Myanmar’s Rohingya minority.

Israel, uniquely, is a fixed item on the UNHRC’s agenda. As Ms Haley has said, “When the council passes more than 70 resolutions against Israel, a country with a strong human rights record, and just seven resolutions against Iran, a country with an abysmal human rights record, you know something is seriously wrong.”

Paradoxically, coinciding with Australia’s election, the Trump administration is preparing to quit the UNHRC following its decision last week to abandon membership of the Paris-based UNESCO, one of the UN’s biggest and most important agencies. The reasoning in both instances is that neither UN body is doing its job and is fixated by “anti-Israel bias”.

Given the line-up of countries elected or re-elected to a three-year term alongside Australia, there is, short of genuine reform, unlikely to be any amelioration of the council’s bias. Among those countries is Pakistan, notorious for double-dealing with Islamist terrorists and using military courts to carry out hundreds of executions. The Democratic Republic of Congo, which also won a seat, has seen thousands of its people killed in the Kasai region in the past year. Ironically, it is under investigation by the UNHRC for human rights abuses.

Ms Bishop says a push by Australia for reform will provide “an opportunity for other countries to scrutinise the record (of countries with a poor human rights record) and hold them to account”. Such a process is overdue. If the UNHRC is to regain credibility, reform must not be delayed.

Australia also has been targeted by the council’s irrational and ill-informed pronouncements over asylum-seekers, and it is imperative that we use our new membership to present a more balanced view of what is occurring in detention centres. World Vision chief advocate Tim Costello thinks otherwise in referring to “inhumane” offshore detention centres, but Australia has a record it can be proud of on human rights.

Ms Bishop has listed priorities that should be pursued such as the empowerment of women, gender rights, indigenous rights, freedom of expression, freedom of religion and the abolition of the death penalty. But nothing will be achieved unless the council is reformed into a body with a reputable membership, no longer preoccupied with hypocritical grandstanding over Israel while ignoring real abuses and persecutions.