

**Legislative Council
Hansard**

Tuesday 12 September 2023

[excerpt...]

Symposium on Toxics and Human Rights

[11.24 a.m.]

Ms WEBB (Nelson) - Well said and thank you, member for Pembroke, for bringing to our attention to the YLOT program; it is a lovely program to hear about. Congratulations to all the kids and adults involved.

It is a great honour to rise and draw this Chamber's attention to a unique event which took place within this parliament on Wednesday, 30 August.

An all-day symposium was held on that date at which the guest of honour was the United Nations Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights, Dr Marcos Orellana. Dr Orellana is an expert in international law and law on human rights and the environment. With his extensive experience working with civil society worldwide on issues concerning global environmental justice, the UN Special Rapporteur Dr Orellana's mandate is to support governments and business to develop environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and waste.

During his visit to Hobart, Dr Orellana was accompanied by Ms Halida Nasic Friberg, a Human Rights Officer in the United Nations Sustainable Human Development Section in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - high-powered guests for Hobart and for our parliament to host, indeed.

During the day-long symposium, which I had the honour to briefly participate in, the discussion explored pesticide regulatory frameworks and human rights relating to drinking water safety. Also discussed was the challenge and potential solutions to pesticide contamination and longevity in Tasmania. A further topic covered was the potential serious health impacts, such as neurodegenerative disorders and concerns over potential determining factors, to mention a few.

The symposium provided Special Rapporteur Dr Orellana and Ms Friberg the opportunity to hear from 24 local experts about heavy metals, pesticides, plastics and their presence in, and impact on, our waterways. Additionally, Dr Orellana and Ms Friberg heard from a range of local politicians and met with senior state bureaucrats.

Just last week, Dr Orellana released his end-of-mission statement on his visit to Australia, in which he observed the following, and I quote:

There is a deep disconnect or distance between the government and community narratives concerning toxics. Where the government sees efforts towards stronger regulations to address the risks of chemicals and pollution, communities and civil society denounce the capture of the State for the benefit of mining, oil, gas, agrochemical and other corporate interests.

He further commented:

There can be no doubt that access to environmental information is critical to environmental decision-making and public participation. I am troubled to learn about significant delays in the processing of requests for environmental information under freedom of information laws. The issue of costs imposed on public interest organizations also stifles access to information.

Draconian restrictions on the right to protest in several states are also very troubling. Peaceful protests are a legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of assembly, and they enable citizens to mobilise their concerns and make them visible to public authorities.

However, Dr Orellana was also optimistic, noting this, and I quote:

But momentum towards a federal Human Rights Act is growing. Human Rights Acts have been passed in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and Queensland. These developments are auspicious and set the stage for the incorporation of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in the Australian legal order.

Special Rapporteur Dr Orellana will ultimately present a full report to the Human Rights Council in September 2024, reporting on his visit here.

This fascinating and high-powered and highly topical symposium was not magicked out of thin air.

It occurred because upon hearing of the Special Rapporteur Dr Orellana's Australian visit, Dr Alison Bleaney of the National Toxics Network and community group, H2OBart - Safe Water for Hobart - issued Dr Orellana with an invitation to visit Hobart as part of his national tour.

With lightning speed, the kernel of an idea of holding a meeting with Dr Orellana sprouted wings and before you could say 'special rapporteur', a professionally organised symposium materialised. Pooling the talents of a myriad of local medical, scientific, legal, media and community expertise, the key organisers pulled off this impressive feat.

Specifically, I acknowledge and thank Dr Alison Bleaney, Dr Fiona Beer, Dr Lisa-ann Gershwin and the University of Tasmania's media school's Dr Claire Konkes for their work and the efforts to present this impressive and informative day-long event.

The efforts of local Tasmanian medical professionals, scientists and community representatives to bring the UN Special Rapporteur on toxins and human rights to Hobart to discuss how a wealthy society such as Tasmania is impacted by toxins in our environment, as well as the responsibility and opportunities to do something about it, should be acknowledged and recognised as the significant public service that it was.

I congratulate and thank all organisers and participants involved in the symposium.
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