

**The Expert Panel on Religious Freedom
C/O Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
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Australia**

13th February 2018

Submission to the Federal Government Review into Religious Freedom in Australia

It was not that long ago that the notion of providing legislative protection for religious freedoms in Australia would have been dismissed as unnecessary by all but a few. This is no longer the case. Reading the signs of the times, observed overseas and within Australia, it is evident that there is a wave of persecution building against religions in general and against Christianity specifically. There are well-orchestrated and well-resourced attacks increasing on religious freedoms being made today.

I fear that in the future, those with the authority and influence today, who promise that religious freedoms are safe, will not be here and then there will be no protections offered if protections are not enshrined in law.

It would appear that there are two main forces at work. By those:

- (1) with self-interest - those who have a particular aversion to religion because it holds a world view which opposes, challenges or disapproves of their life choices and beliefs.
- (2) who are well-meaning but misinformed - those who have been caught up with the false rhetoric of “equality” and “discrimination” spruiked by celebrities, media forces and those orchestrating the anti-religious movement.
 - All persons should be treated with respect. Australia should uphold equal human dignity and rights but this does not mean a blind equal treatment of all people in all things at all times. Eg: not all Australian pay the same rate of tax yet all Australians should enjoy the same access to the country’s amenities.
 - Anti-discrimination sentiment and laws exist to prevent the unjust treatment of people because of prejudice, false perceptions or because of any label, rather than on their own attributes or merits. In a broader sense, we do need to recognise the differences that exist in actions and choices. It is absurd, for instance, for a driver being fined for driving in a bus/taxi lane to claim that s/he should not be prosecuted because it is discriminatory to be fined just because s/he was driving a private vehicle rather than a bus or taxi or for a “card-carrying member of the communist party” to claim discrimination for being prevented to run as a Liberal Party candidate.

The plebiscite over same sex marriage and the subsequent amendments to the Marriage Act have served as a catalyst for a concerted, deliberate and organised anti-religious attack. Not content with seeking tolerance for those without religious faith or affiliation, pressures are being brought to bear to eliminate the influence and rights of religion to exist in anything but the private domain. Surely, different views are held by people and, when appropriate, these issues, ideals and views should be discussed, argued and debated in a civilised and respectful manner; “playing the ball, not the player”.

It is obvious that existing Australian law no longer adequately protects the human right to freedom of religion as illustrated by, among other examples:

- A state government commissioner ruling that the (Australia's) Catholic bishops may have broken the law in distributing their booklet "Don't Mess with Marriage" ... The Bishops' booklet was distributed nationwide but in Tasmania, the Archbishop of Hobart, Julian Porteous, sent it home in a sealed envelope to parents of children enrolled in Catholic schools. It is an inoffensive booklet, written in the style of a pastoral letter and very respectful of same-sex attracted people. It was written **for Catholics, explaining the Catholic position on marriage**. A complaint that it was offensive was lodged and it was ruled that not just Archbishop Porteous, but the entire Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, has a case to answer. The matter went to court. This is absurd!
- the persecution and vilification of Margaret Court for stating her views on marriage which reflected her religious beliefs and values; it is significant that these actually reflected the law of the land at the time. By contrast, another Australian sporting hero, Ian Thorpe, canvassed for a change in the law concerning marriage. Surely, both should continue to be respected and be permitted to hold and express their views. The law of the land should protect them both.

We should not permit the re-writing of Australian history. From the earliest days, and now even more so, Australia welcomes peoples of different cultures and faiths which together create our Australian society. We should not forget that our country was founded and organised predominantly on Christian principles and ideals.

Despite the scandals, affluent times which mitigate against religious engagement and smorgasbord of choice, the 2016 Census informs us that while there is a decline in the proportion of Australians who claim to hold an affiliation with any organised religion, the overwhelming majority of Australian's (69.1%) still claim to be religious in some way. Of these, more than half (51.5%) of Australians affiliate themselves with a Christian faith.

Schools not only exist to provide quality education for their students but as part of their educational offerings, impart their own world views, religious or not. These are not kept in secret as schools clearly proclaim for what they stand. It is a nonsense that schools be forced to employ someone who by actions or public profession undermines the beliefs, values of the school. Surely any organisation must be protected to employ those it believes will support its purpose.

Within the school environment, parents' rights to be parents must be protected so they have some choice of what their children are taught. The current school system in Australia affords parents' choice as to the type of education (religious or not) their children experience. We forget that originally schools in Australia were in fact conducted by the churches. Parents must be afforded the right for their children to be taught values, morals and religious views in harmony with theirs; to this end the right to withdraw their children from classes where ideals contrary to theirs are promulgated.

Likewise, Christian student organisations at universities must be protected to allow only membership to those who hold, or who are genuinely open to holding, beliefs in harmony with theirs. It is ridiculous to say Christian groups must permit students to join them who openly declare their beliefs and values that are contrary to that of Christian organisation. Surely, the Fire and Rescue Departments must be permitted to screen out of employment prospect, those people who are currently known arsonists. Or is this too "discriminatory"?

While respecting others, individuals and organisations should be free to express their religious beliefs. People can make up their own minds whether or not they accept these expressions. Recognising that there is a difference between expressing a religious faith and forcing it upon another, without

protections in law, it is not that far-fetched to speculate that in a future time, churches might be forced to “work” in secret. By “work” I mean provide worship, share and proclaim their faith and perform works of charity, service and mercy as an expression and consequence of their beliefs.

- Religions need to be protected so they may continue to build churches, mosques, temples and synagogues that look like churches, mosques, temples and synagogues.
- People must be protected so that they may continue to:
 - wear religious jewellery such as crucifixes, crosses, religious medallions.
 - profess their faith or pray.

Ironically, we see in other countries, people losing or being threatened to lose their jobs or have their careers impeded for:

- wearing a crucifix or some other religious symbol
- offering to pray for, or wish a blessing on, another ...

... while at the same time others may swear profanities and wear obscene images and words on T-shirts with immunity. It is ridiculous that those swearing or wearing obscenities are also protected in law if they are held to account by others for causing offence.

Adherents of religion must be protected from being forced to act contrary to their faith. There is choice and options available within Australia. For example: no minister should be compelled to perform a marriage ceremony contrary to their religious beliefs; no medical practitioner should be forced to carry out a medical procedure such a killing a person (abortion or euthanasia) that is contrary to their faith.

Let us not forget the wonderful effect that religions have on society and on the lives of people: providing a sense of meaning and purpose, well-being, stewardship of the Earth, hope, joy and charity. Consider all the religious agencies that seek to protect and care for the most vulnerable, who work to bring justice, combat poverty, provide education, health care and so on; often for those and the government cannot afford to provide. People living out their religious conviction provide immeasurable service to Australia and save the tax payer an untold financial burden. They need to be protected.

An easy internet search provides copious studies that acclaim the health and other benefits of religion. Australians who work to serve others because of their religious faith should be protected in doing so. There must be written laws to protect Australians so they are free to believe and express their religious beliefs. These laws must be carefully written so that they are not used contrary to their original purpose.

In a misguided effort to be, and to be seen to be, “non-discriminatory” and “inclusive”, Australia threatens to become increasingly discriminatory against, and exclusive of, religion. Sadly, legal protection is required to protect religious freedoms in our nation.

Yours sincerely



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