

In the interests of brevity, I propose to make two brief comments on the Religious Discrimination Bill which is the centrepiece of the legislative package being considered by the Committee.

The Bill has been the subject of considerable public debate during its development and since it was introduced into this Parliament.

While the department welcomes that debate we are concerned that, at times, two foundational points have been lost.

First, the primary purpose of this Bill is to protect ordinary people of faith from discrimination as they go about their daily lives. The Bill also protects those who experience discrimination because they do not adhere to any faith or religious belief. Sadly, as the Religious Freedom Review chaired by Philip Ruddock heard, many Australians, particularly those from minority faiths, experience discrimination all too often on the basis of their religious beliefs or activities. At present, there are only limited protections for these people under the Commonwealth's anti-discrimination regime.

Secondly, once enacted, the Bill will operate concurrently with the four Acts that constitute that anti-discrimination regime. These existing laws protect people from discrimination on grounds including age, race, sex, sexual orientation, gender and disability. Depending on the circumstances, particular conduct may amount to discrimination under one or more of those laws. Moreover, conduct that does not amount to discrimination under the Religious Discrimination Bill may nonetheless amount to discrimination for the purposes of, for example, the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*.

We would happy to take any questions the Committee may have.