

Thank you for the opportunity to present to the PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS regarding the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 and related bills.

If asked to identify nations known for committing human rights abuses, Australia would not be on the list. We are incredibly blessed to live in this nation. And so, it surprises most Australians to discover that, in its 2017 Periodic Review of Australia, the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern at our lack of protection against discrimination on the basis of religion and called on Australia to address the deficiency.

Their concern is based on the fact that, despite Australia being a signatory to the United Nations Human Rights Charter regarding freedom of religion, the protections are not recognised in Australian law. Article 18 states: ***Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.***

Without these protections in Australian federal law, there are obvious issues that need fixing. For example, in NSW or South Australia, if you put a sign up outside your restaurant saying, “we don’t serve Hindus”, or Christians, or Muslims, you would not be breaking the law.

Individuals are also affected. Recent McCrindle Research polling revealed that 29% of Australians report having experienced discrimination against them because of their religion or religious views.

It is the hope of the Australian Christian Lobby and our 230,000 Australian supporters, that we are about to see this remedied, giving confidence to the approximately 70% of Australians who identify as religious that they will be protected against discrimination. Religious schools also have reason to be encouraged, with the legislation offering protection for them to maintain their religious character, in the same way that political parties protect their ethos.

This Bill is fundamental to the strengthening of Australia as a tolerant and diverse nation. Religious freedom is necessary for freedom of conscience, the essence of a free society. The Australian Christian Lobby supports the proposed *Religious Discrimination Bill 2021* and submits that, subject to some minor amendment, the Bill should be enacted prior to the 2022 election.