

Opening Statement - Religious Discrimination Bills

Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights - 13th January 2022, 1:30 pm.

From Rev Christopher Duke, Presbyterian Church of Australia

Around the world, Australia has long shone as a beacon of hope for the possibility of peaceful and successful national multiculturalism. Our common identity as Australian citizens, with equal rights before the law, helps bridge the often-painful differences in our ethnicities, language, culture, and religion/belief.

But if the Federal government fails to protect religious freedom as a positive right in law, against the ever-increasing erasures at state level, then genuinely tolerant multiculturalism in Australia will disappear.

In recent times our parliamentary system has failed in its duty to protect our multicultural national identity and instead adopted a series of illogical and divisive propositions.

The first proposition is 'intolerance in the name of tolerance'- the absurd idea that social cohesion and unity can be achieved by weaponizing the law to crush & punish any public utterances or appearances of disagreement with state sanctioned beliefs. History has shown us many, many times that the fruit of such dehumanising and oppressive laws only ends in misery.

The second proposition is that the Law can actually objectively measure and should therefore harshly punish subjective feelings! Of course, this can only really be done if certain views *in and of themselves* are classed as irrefutable evidence of certain 'illegal or discriminatory' feelings.

What these two absurd ideas amount to is the imposition of a quasi - 'government religion' on all citizens, not just religious citizens. It is unconstitutional, immoral, discriminatory and inhumane.

And yet, that is exactly what Tasmania has already done, and what Victoria is at this very moment, poised to do. These state governments have criminalised a select set of religious beliefs (and non-religious beliefs that align with them) as inherently harmful and dangerous. These politically oppressive laws are themselves bigoted and discriminatory! This is why at a federal level it is necessary to have legislation that allows for religious freedom, otherwise in no time this attribute will be destroyed in Australia.

We are at the crossroad for our nation; either our Australian federal parliamentarians will protect multiculturalism by strengthening and supporting religious freedom, or they will crush multiculturalism in Australia by allowing states to discriminate against religious believers (and anyone who agrees with them) by removing their basic human rights.

The decision as to whether Australia will protect or destroy our genuine 'multiculturalism' in law, rests with federal parliamentarians in the form and fate of these Bills.

Whatever their ideologically political differences may be, every single Member of Parliament in Australia relies on their rights to be able to exclusively associate with likeminded supporters or party members, to exercise their freedom of conscience when arguing their chosen points of view and to do so safe in the knowledge that they have unfettered freedom of speech in Parliament House!

We are not demanding unfettered speech. But we are asking for freedom in speech and activity in line with our tenets and doctrines in order to live out our lives peacefully in our families and communities.

Those rights don't only belong to you. In fact, the main substance of your jobs, is to ensure them for the rest of us. These are basic rights that all people, religious or not, should be entitled to in a democratic nation like ours.

We ask you to demonstrate moral courage, unwavering conviction and steadfast leadership to do what is right, to value multiculturalism, to stop the erosion of the rights to free association, speech and conscience for religious and non-religious people in Australia.

Kind Regards,

Rev Christopher Duke
Presbyterian Church of Australia
Presbyterian Church of Victoria