

Statement from Faith Leaders

19th November 2021

We are grateful that the Government has engaged in extensive consultations with a diverse group of faith leaders in relation to the latest draft of the Religious Discrimination Bill. This consultation is appropriate, given that any such Bill will necessarily have a significant effect upon people of faith and the religious bodies and organisations which they have established.

As recognised by the Ruddock Review, protections against religious discrimination at a federal level are long overdue. Faith leaders would welcome the introduction of substantive protections for people of faith against faith-based discrimination. Such protections are needed because federally there is at present little if any legislative protection against discrimination directed at a person based on their religious identity and belief, and there are inconsistencies in the manner in which States and Territories have addressed the issue, if at all. This is in contrast to the existence of Federal legislation which protects against discrimination based on certain other attributes.

Although we have not seen the Bill, we understand from our discussions with the Government that some of the measures present in earlier exposure drafts have been removed, such as the protections against employer codes of conduct that restrict religious speech outside the workplace, and the conscience protection for healthcare professionals. We would have preferred that these protections had been retained in some form.

Based on what we have been informed will be the contents of the Bill, we welcome this Bill because it will protect people of faith from discrimination on the basis of their religious beliefs, and will allow faith-based organisations to act in accordance with their doctrines, tenets and beliefs without this being disallowed as religious discrimination.

Human rights legislation of the kind that is envisaged should be subject to periodic review. We will monitor the effect of any legislation that may be enacted, and will readily co-operate with the government in any review process to optimise the benefits of the legislation for all Australians.

With the more controversial measures reportedly having been removed from the Bill, there appears to be no sensible reason for it to generate a deeply polarising debate over religion. If the reports about the key provisions of the Bill are correct, it will deserve bipartisan support.

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Signed,

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Archbishop of Melbourne
Chair, Bishops Commission for
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Peter Wertheim AM
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The Rt Rev. Dr Michael Stead
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Bishop of South Sydney
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The Most Rev.
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The Rev. Mark Wilson
National Ministries Director
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Dr Marshall Ballantine-Jones
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Orthodox Church – Diocese
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