

# Dreyfus warns schools legal protection will go

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Labor's legal affairs spokesman Mark Dreyfus. Picture: Kym Smith

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Labor legal affairs spokesman Mark Dreyfus has told faith-based educators a Shorten government would remove key legal protections for religious freedoms, fuelling concerns schools will find it more difficult to insist teachers agree to uphold their core values.

Mr Dreyfus yesterday told Christian schools a Shorten government would remove key legislative protections for religious freedoms — enshrined by way of exemptions to the Sex Discrimination Act — around the employment of teachers.

The letter from Mr Dreyfus has fanned concerns after Labor deputy leader Tanya Plibersek last week signalled a willingness to support religious schools to continue to employ staff that “faithfully represent their values”.

Christian Schools Australia national policy director Mark Spencer told The Australian the letter from Mr Dreyfus made it “very clear” a Labor government would remove exemptions in the SDA covering teachers and students.

“If we remove the exemptions for staff it will fundamentally change the character of our schools,” he said.

“We’ve already established that removing the exemption around the provision of education would effectively change what we could teach. Now we are talking about potentially changing who can teach. If we lose the exemptions without some other form of protection for religious freedom then we would be unable to ensure teachers acted in accordance with our values.”

In his letter, Mr Dreyfus said Labor would ask the “ALRC (Australian Law Reform Commission) to provide recommendations on how best to remove the exemptions from discrimination against LGBTQI students and teachers contained in commonwealth legislation as a priority”.

Ms Plibersek last week provided an assurance it was possible to find a balance “where we don’t discriminate against people because of who they love or how they identify but that those people who are employees of an organisation have to faithfully represent the values of that organisation”.

In April, Attorney-General Christian Porter asked the ALRC to undertake a “comprehensive review of the framework of religious exemptions in anti-discrimination legislation across Australia”.

The review was commissioned after the Coalition and Labor failed to reach agreement on how to prevent schools from being able to discriminate against LGBTQI students while also preserving the ability of faith-based educators to uphold key values.

The government asked the ALRC to report its findings by April 2020. Mr Dreyfus indicated a Labor government could speed up the review.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/dreyfus-warns-schools-legal-protection-will-go/news-story/446b63e15592d8894e2c9d8ccd15ecfe>