

The Issues with Religious Freedom

By Dr Con Kafataris, 25 June 2019

Why we need Religious Freedom legislation

- Both major parties have activists that would prefer to advance LGBT rights over those of religious people's freedom to live and proclaim their faith with freedom. This was highlighted by the Penny Wong Bill in December 2018.
- Legal experts confirm that there are no clear-cut protections for religious freedom in Australia. This has been highlighted by the sacking of Rugby star Israel Folau.
- The Morrison Government has committed to providing a religious discrimination act (RDA). However, there are serious concerns that this draft legislation is only 'tinkering at the edges' and will merely include religion with other suite of attributes against which one cannot be discriminated against.
- There are serious concerns that it will NOT protect freedom of speech and freedom of conscience. Nor will it allow religious schools to employ teachers who share the values of the religion. The Attorney General has confirmed that it will not protect Israel Folau.
- To be fair, the response was crafted in a political climate where LGBT rights were a hot issue when it looked like Shorten would become the next PM.

Why this bill will not give us the rights we need

- Discrimination Acts are '**negative rights**' as they only dictate what others CANNOT DO to you. They do not give you any **positive right** as to what YOU CAN DO. So, we need legislation that will give all Australians the **positive rights** of freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of parenting and freedom of association.
- The Morrison Government has asked the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) to investigate how to **remove** the current exemptions to discrimination laws that allow religious schools to only hire teachers that share the values of the school while still 'maintaining the ethos' of the school.
- But how can these schools maintain this ethos if the only protections they have are to be removed and not replaced with a positive right to employ teachers of the same faith?
- The ALRC will issue an interim report in Sept 2019 with final report in April 2020. This will have major ramifications for religious schools.

The Opportunity we have Right Now

- Religious Freedom was a significant issue in the recent Federal Election.
- It was responsible for significant primary swings against the ALP across Western and South-West Sydney eg -7.4% in McMahon, -6.7% in Chifley and -6.2% in Fowler. If this trend continues these seats will cease being safe Labor seats.

- This means that MPs of both major parties are acutely sensitive to the issue of religious freedom.
- The political climate has significantly changed - religious Freedom is now a hot issue and LGBT activists are being painted as bullies.
- Therefore, we have an opportunity to ask for way more than what Government was committed to in Dec 2018. It's a bit like being able to ask for much higher price for your home because the market has turned upwards.

The Solution

- MPs are seriously interested in votes; therefore, they will respond to an issue that they perceive as affecting their chances of re-election.
- We need to apply POLITICAL PRESSURE on MPs of both the lower house and upper house to convince them to give these positive rights or they will suffer at the ballot box.
- We must make them aware of what we want, how important it is for us and the fact that it will determine how we vote. We must make them understand that their actions will have consequences at the next election.
- Analogy: a war is usually fought in 3 theatres, ground, sea and air.
 - war on the Ground is visiting MPs in their offices
 - war on the Sea is by visiting MPs at local community events
 - war in the Air is by writing to MPs and sending petitions.

The War on the Ground: Visiting your MP

- Everyone has the legal democratic right to visit your local federal MP but very few people actually do. It is those people that MPs usually listens to. The LGBT lobby has been actively lobbying MPs for years and this is why SSM is now law.
- The procedure is simple: call your local MP and ask for an appointment to meet with them to discuss your concerns over religious freedom. In the current climate MPs are acutely sensitive to this issue and will meet with you. You can go alone or with a few family or friends from your electorate.
- The key is to be **prepared**, be **precise** and be **practical**.

| | THOUGHTS | ACTIONS |
|--------------------|--|--|
| BE PREPARED | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let the Holy Spirit guide you • The MP represents YOU • Have enough Background Info • Don't make assumptions • Rehearse your strategy if the MP becomes hostile, but it's unlikely | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prayer • Written Agenda • If more than one speaker, then work out order. • Disorganised discussion makes it easy to fob you off |

| | THOUGHTS | ACTIONS |
|---------------------|--|---|
| BE PRECISE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stick to your agenda • Don't be distracted • Avoid rabbit trails • Make notes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present your agenda in order • Don't interrupt each other • Don't preach or sermonise • Make sure your MP understands clearly what you want • Make your requests SPECIFIC and not general • Don't allow the MP to give vague non-committal answers • Persist until the MP gives you a specific yes or no answer |
| BE PRACTICAL | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind yourself that they work for YOU • You want PRACTICAL outcomes from the meeting. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell MP that RF is really important to you and it will direct your vote • Get commitment from MP to take practical steps to protect RF • Let the MP know that you will be telling everyone in the community about their commitment • Ask to meet again to discuss progress of these steps • Thank your MP. |

Practical Example

- We visited Chris Bowen (former Labor shadow treasurer) in Feb 2018. He confirmed that he supported religious schools having rights to employ teachers who shared their faith and committed to meet again once the Ruddock Report was available.
- The Libs sat on the Ruddock Report so we didn't meet again until after the election. Then the Penny Wong bill exposed Labor's true colours so we didn't meeting again in 2018.
- We later met Chris Bowen on 31st May 2019 and he was very keen to work with us. He identified problems with Religious Freedom (RF) and committed to going through the draft of the Porter Bill with us once it was released - even if that means organising a meeting at short notice. I pointed out that the bill is unlikely to be adequate and asked him to help expand the bill, to which he said he was open to doing and taking it further.
- In both meetings we did much the same thing, but the results were very different - so what changed? The political climate had changed - the market had turned so we could ask a higher price.

War in the Sea: visiting your MP at Community Events

- Here you meet MP outside their office, so discussion is usually shorter and less formal.

- MPs usually make details of these events available on their websites or via their staff.
- These meetings provide opportunity to register your concern and to ask your MP that you would like to meet with them to discuss the issues in more detail.
- If many people want to meet with MP about RF, the MP will realise that RF is a big deal for their electorate and be more willing to cooperate.

War in the Air: Writing to MPs

- Writing positive letters to your MP is a good way to register your concern. There is no limit to the number of letters you can send or how often. The more you send, the more you will be noticed. Keep your letters positive and constructive. Never be abusive.
- It's even better to **hand deliver** your letters to your MP. This is also a great way of getting to know your MPs staff, which will be useful for organising meetings.
- **Rough rule of thumb:** one hand-written letter is worth 100 emails, especially emails from outside the electorate. Why? Because writing a letter takes TIME and MPs know how busy everyone is, including themselves.
- The fact that someone took the time to write a letter and hand deliver speaks much louder than form letters circulated via the internet. Form letters and petitions from outside the electorate usually end up being binned.
- Each Senator from your state represents you as well, and they may be the reason why Religious Freedom Bills pass or fail. We only escaped the Penny Wong Bill by ONE VOTE in the Senate, so it's crucial that your Senators hear your concerns as well.
- Therefore, please send copies of your letter to your MP to all the sitting Senators in your State. Now that Senate seats are confirmed, you should be able to get addresses of all your State's 12 Senators from the Parliamentary website.

Petitions

- Petitions are usually ignored by MPs unless they come from their electorate or are in large numbers and tabled in parliament.
- Petitions tabled in parliament require a format and benefit from MP guidance.
- Paper petitions are more effective for 2 reasons:
 - A wad of papers is much thicker and the optics are much better in parliament
 - The fact that someone took the time to read and sign a piece of paper means more to MPs than mass petition circulated via the internet.
- Liberal Senator for NSW Concetta Fierravanti-Wells has prepared a paper petition on Religious Freedom that she is prepared to table in Parliament. The aim is to have 100,000 signatures convince MPs that they need to give protection for religious freedom.
- Besides name and signature, suburb and/or postcode is recorded so MPs can see that this is an issue ACROSS THE COUNTRY not just in one area.

- This petition will be in a format that cannot be altered, as it is the Senator's petition. It must be printed, signatures added and then mailed back to the PO Box on the bottom of the petition.
- Please print and get as many people to sign it as possible. Please share the PDF and ask your friends and contacts to collect signatures to the petition.

Call to Action

1. **Call** your MP's office and ask for an appointment to see them to discuss Religious Freedom.
2. **Write** a letter registering your concern on RF and send it to your local MP, your Senators and the Prime Minister's office.
3. **Refer to and attach** the paper entitled: "*ICS Submission on Freedom of Religion and Belief Agenda PMO 22.6.19*". This is a practical resource your MP can act on and can be downloaded from the following web site or dropbox:
 - www.airborne.org/events.php
 - <https://tinyurl.com/y2jszrut>
4. **Print** Concetta Fierravanti-Wells petition, collect as many signatures as you can and send them back to her. This petition is also available on the above web site and dropbox.
5. **Leverage** your efforts, share this document and the petition with all your contacts.
6. **Encourage** your family, friends and concerned colleagues to visit their local MPs and to also collect signatures for the above petition.
7. **Repeat** the process, write again, call again and visit again.
8. **Persist** until we get what we need... legal protection of religious freedom that gives us the positive rights of freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of parenting, freedom of association and freedom from discrimination.

Resources:

How to contact Members of the House of Representatives and Senate:

www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Guidelines_for_Contacting_Senators_and_Members

How to address MPs:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Senators_and_Members/Guidelines_for_Contacting_Senators_and_Members/How_to_address_Senators_and_Members