

Israel Folau's religious freedom the defining issue of our time



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Israel Folau with his wife Maria Folau at Kenthurst Uniting Church after a Sunday service. Picture: Hollie Adams

Just when you thought the administration of rugby could not get worse, it continues to be a sporting embarrassment.

Does no one in a position of leadership understand the damage that is being done to the game as a result of the Israel Folau affair?

Who is going to be brave enough to put their hand up, even on the eve of this “tribunal” meeting tomorrow; or do we just keep digging the hole and burying the game?

Let me say up front that Rugby Australia, the administration, can't win.

They have the most expensive legal advisers that money can buy. Surely they are telling Rugby Australia that this is unwinnable.

RA may get some vicarious satisfaction by hoping that Israel will be punished, rubbed out of the game, humiliated, ostracised, denigrated and the contract ripped up.

Well, I say, do your best. That strategy will not win.

I have written three articles in this newspaper on this matter. They have been among the most read and thousands of readers have left comments.

It is unprecedented and 95 per cent of them support Israel Folau's right to articulate his religious beliefs.

In one week it is infinitely worse than it was.

We read in this paper, earlier this week, that the gifted Polynesian captain of Queensland rugby, Samu Kerevi, posted on Instagram on Easter Thursday, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that, whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life ... Thank You Jesus for dying on the cross for me. I love you Jesus."

You will recall we learnt that the tribunal could not meet that same weekend of the "offence".

Rugby Australia wanted to sack Israel Folau for his Christian views.

It couldn't because it was Easter and everyone at Rugby Australia was taking a holiday to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Rugby Australia Chief Executive Raelene Castle.
Rugby star Israel Folau who faces an uncertain future.

And when we get to the tribunal stage, and affidavits are sworn, witnesses will take the stand, and, as Bernard Gaynor wrote: "Our legal system, in its zeal for the facts will allow people to swear on the Bible that what they say is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help them God ... the same Bible that Israel Folau quoted from ... the same Bible that Raelene Castle says is so offensive that merely quoting from it should see one cast, weeping and gnashing their teeth into the exterior darkness ... the same Bible (on which) our governors-general and prime ministers take their oath of - office."

The impotence of rugby leadership has been laid bare. Sporting oblivion beckons.

Did anyone note that only 10,000 people attended the Waratahs game at the brand new Bankwest Stadium last Saturday night? The public, fed up with the treatment of Folau, and all else, are voting with their feet and their wallets.

Yet what we see may be only the tip of the iceberg because players of similar Christian beliefs to those of Israel are saying, 'well, you may as well sack all of us because we have the same Christian beliefs as Israel'.

I coached Taniela Tupou a couple of years ago in the Barbarians. A wonderful, simple, gentle, God-fearing person.

He said on Facebook this week: "I will never apologise for my faith and for what I believe in, religion had nothing to do with rugby."

Kerevi, who posted the Christian message at Easter, also said he would not apologise for his faith in Jesus Christ.

They are basically saying, sack us or back off Israel.

Brisbane-born Billy Vunipola was slapped with a warning, in England, when he supported Israel; but three of his England teammates have stood up and backed Vunipola.

Make no mistake, this is a rugby crisis which has morphed into a social crisis which will open gigantic wounds in relation to freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

It will be on for young and old. If need be, Israel will take this all the way and he will have no trouble funding any legal challenge.

Then I note that Israel, apparently, is not fighting to continue his rugby career in this country because as colleague Wayne Smith writes: "Rugby Australia has made it quite clear that whether he wins the case or loses it, his time with the Wallabies and Waratahs is over".

I beg your pardon? So, if the tribunal finds in favour of freedom of speech and freedom of religion, he will be banished anyway.

If it finds against him, the matter will go to a higher authority to be heard all over again.

Rugby Australia are being represented at the tribunal tomorrow by former solicitor-general Justin Gleeson QC. Talk about pulling out the big guns.



Israel Folau (L) vies for the ball with South Africa's centre Andre Esterhuizen during the Rugby Championship match between South Africa and Australia in Port Elizabeth, South Africa last September.

Gleeson is among the very best. That means he is among the dearest.

So, in order to nail, humiliate, condemn, banish and isolate Israel Folau, Rugby Australia are sparing no expense with money they do not have.

The rugby family must ask again, when are this blazer mob going to do the decent thing and resign or be thrown out?

They may be in office but they are not in power.

We have the unthinkable, where highly paid players are publicly saying who they will play with and who they won't.

Not if I was coaching they wouldn't. They would be told simply and emphatically that they do not pick the team.

Remember, this is the same board of Rugby Australia who axed the Western Force in 2017 to save \$6 million when Andrew Forrest was offering the same administration \$50m.

Now, Raelene Castle, on more than \$800,000 a year, backed by the board, has decided that Israel Folau will not play for Australia.

To hell with the tribunal. She will be forced to pay out his \$4m contract. This is really smart stuff.

On the eve of the Rugby World Cup, the administration is at war with its best player; and at war with players from the Pacific islands, who comprise almost half of the Australian team.

The place has gone mad.

Israel Folau could lose his job for quoting the Bible.

Sharing an excerpt from the world's highest selling book is now discrimination, even though there is not a skerrick of evidence that Israel discriminated against anyone.

As Jennifer Oriel wrote in this paper this week, "corporate Australia is turning its back on free speech. Big business is Big Brother. The battle between Australia's sporting codes (remember the chairman of the Australian Rugby League Commission suggested Israel was a poor cultural fit for his game) looks increasingly like cashed-up bullies hunting a Christian."

Among the thousands of comments I have received on previous articles, Chris summed it up best, "these are the defining issues of our time".

"Do we keep quiet while the institutions and sport we love are torn apart by virtue-seeking fools ... they are in the minority ... time to take a stand Australians.

"Thank god, Jesus and Christianity for giving us your voice, Alan. Sometimes it feels like a lone voice in the swell of the PC media.

“But the soon to be not-silent majority stand with you.”

Former prime minister Tony Abbott says it best: “If the silent majority stay silent they can’t expect to remain a majority.”

Tomorrow, at the tribunal, it is the virtue-signalling administrators of Australian Rugby who must be silenced for good, not Israel Folau.

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/sport/rugby-union/israel-folaus-religious-freedom-the-defining-issue-of-our-time/news-story/675b60e44832bf62246208ebd33d6eec>