

# Folau being persecuted by the nation he loves: Margaret Court

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Tennis legend Margaret Court has backed embattled rugby star Israel Folau's right to speak about his religious beliefs.

- THE AUSTRALIAN
- APRIL 18, 2019
- **PAIGE TAYLOR**, WA BUREAU CHIEF

Tennis great Margaret Court says her heart goes out to Israel Folau, whom she describes as persecuted by the country he is proud to represent in rugby.

"He could have been a little bit more diplomatic but the penalty he's receiving is very severe," Mrs Court said.

Mrs Court said that as someone who had also had an encounter with Jesus Christ, she understood Folau was speaking from love and a deep belief that everyone can be saved if they repent. She said she wished he could show Australia what is in his heart. "I was on the highway to hell when I was No 1 in the world in tennis and reached out to Christ," she said.

"I understand why Israel is doing this: you want everybody to know Christ and under it all there is a great love for your nation and you want people to know what you have received.

"That means drug addicts, gays, alcoholics: they all come to my church and I love them and I'm sure Israel loves them too.

"What he is saying about repenting is straight out of the Bible. My heart goes out to him because he's being persecuted."

In 1963, Mrs Court, 76, was the first Australian woman to win Wimbledon. She won a total of 24 grand slam singles titles in a tennis career considered one of the greatest. She was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1979. Now a Pentecostal minister and head of the Victory Life church she founded in Perth, Mrs Court's commentary on same-sex marriage and transgender issues has repeatedly created furore. Last year former world No 1 Billie Jean King joined calls for Melbourne's Margaret Court Arena to be renamed.

Mrs Court said yesterday she could see Folau was motivated to help others.

"He really just wants people to come to Christ," Mrs Court said. "That's where I believe people haven't really read his heart.

"I don't think he should be penalised because really there's a truth there. We have to repent and turn away from some things if we want to know him."

Mrs Court said she sent Folau one of her books via Rugby Australia last year, when he was given a warning over inflammatory social media posts. She said she included a note offering to listen if he wanted to talk, but she is unsure if it ever reached him.

Her support comes as [Liberal MP Tim Wilson](#) says he is "concerned" about Rugby Australia's move to sack Folau.

The gay MP, who proposed to his husband in parliament while speaking on the same-sex marriage bill in 2017, declared rugby should not just be a game for "people who are agnostic or atheist".

"There is a need for people to be able to express their views on something like religion, and their religious beliefs, without censorship," Mr Wilson told the ABC.

"I don't know the details of the EBA or the contractual arrangements that sit between (Rugby Australia) and Israel Folau, but I would have thought that Rugby Australia should be very cautious in how they are conducting themselves.

"Rugby isn't just a game for people who are agnostic or atheist. In a free, pluralistic democracy, that should have space for everybody to express their opinion."

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/sport/rugby-union/folau-being-persecuted-by-the-nation-she-loves-margaret-court/news-story/557cdaafec0f4e60acf6051b56bca3cb>