



Union of Australian Women

(VICTORIAN SECTION)

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The Expert Panel on Religious Freedom
C/_ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
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Submission re Freedom of Religion Inquiry

The Union of Australian Women Victoria has campaigned for almost 70 years for the well-being and status of women, for peace, human rights and social justice.

We understand that religious freedom should be about protecting people from discrimination on the basis of their religion, and not about giving religious people and their organisations the right to discriminate against others.

Australians already have the right to practice their religious beliefs. We do not think that this right is in any way threatened by the recent marriage equality legislation. We are most concerned that there should be no successful attempt to wind back rights concerning LGBTI people or others in the community. Priests already have the power to decide who they will marry. However, civil celebrants are empowered by the government to perform a public duty and should not be allowed to discriminate on the basis of religious belief or personal conscience.

Religious organisations already have the right to discriminate against some people through exemptions to anti-discrimination laws. Religious schools, for example, can sack teachers who are LGBTI or single parents, or refuse to employ them on the grounds of their gender or marital status. Hospitals and health services run by religious organisations are allowed to refuse to provide certain services, particularly in the area of family planning. Religious charities that provide publicly funded welfare and social services can legally refuse LGBTI people and others where the refusal is in line with the charity's religious beliefs. The exemptions allow religious organisations to deny some people opportunities for employment, education and services.

The UAW believes that in a secular society there is no place for such discrimination. In a democratic society it is unacceptable, particularly where those institutions accept public funds. There is no justification for extending these exemptions because of the ill-founded fears of some people following marriage equality. Businesses should not be allowed to

discriminate on the basis of religious belief. What next? That they be allowed to discriminate on the basis of colour, ethnicity? Australians are proud of our multicultural society; diversity is valued and seen as enriching our society. There should be no place for increasing the discrimination that unfortunately already exists. We believe that the current religious discriminatory provisions for bodies that receive taxpayer public funding should, in fact, be wound back.

Australian people voted overwhelmingly for fairness and equality for LGBTI people; the Bill that was presented to Parliament was well-thought out, and amendments to increase discrimination protections were rejected. The UAW is strongly opposed to any attempts to wind back human rights and impose further discrimination on so-called religious grounds.

Anne Sgro
President

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