



DiversityACT
COMMUNITY SERVICES

Diversity ACT Community Services
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Senator the Hon Zed Seselja
Parliament House
Canberra

23 November 2021

Dear Senator Seselja,

RE: Religious Discrimination Bill 2021

I am writing to you on behalf of the members of Diversity ACT Community Services (Diversity ACT), an LGBTIAQ+ support agency with members in Queanbeyan, Goulburn and the greater ACT region, to express deep concern about the potential negative impact of the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 (the bill), and the associated amendments to other legislation. Diversity ACT hopes that you will be voting against this bill.

Diversity ACT is committed to the right of every person to a robust freedom of religion as described in Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Every person is equal before the law and any permission given to individuals or religious organisations that allows them to discriminate on the basis of religious belief must be carefully balanced against the rights of people to be free from discrimination.

Diversity ACT provided a submission on the second Exposure Draft of this bill. As we stated in that submission, we view the right to religious freedom as an important element in the protection of all human rights by law nationally. Our position remains that legislative provisions for religious freedom would best be made through the mechanism of a comprehensive Human Rights Act.

Reporting in the last week suggests that the bill contains provisions that:

- would make it unlawful for a qualifying body to sanction someone for making offensive remarks
- mean employees in faith-based organisations (such as hospitals, aged care facilities and accommodation providers) have little protection if their beliefs differ from those of their employer
- Australians in the workplace may not be protected where a manager or colleague makes offensive, uninformed or damaging statements based on religious beliefs.

If this reporting is accurate, then many of the concerns we raised in our submission on the second Exposure Draft regarding the issue of abuse of power, specifically in the preferencing of the religious rights of one group with more power over the human rights of other groups with less power, remain unaddressed.

Diversity ACT remains concerned that the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 does not yet achieve the balance between religious freedoms and human rights that is required. We fear that vulnerable people such as women, single parents, LGBTIAQ+ people, people with a disability and ethnically and religiously diverse populations are likely to be adversely impacted should the bill be implemented in its current form.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss our concerns with you in more detail before the bill is brought before the Parliament. We acknowledge that the timeframe is extremely short. If there is no opportunity for that discussion, we reiterate our hope that you will vote to protect vulnerable Australians, and reject this bill.

Sincerely



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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Megan Watts". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured background.

Megan Watts
President
Diversity ACT Community Services

