



The Compelling Need for a Federal Religious Discrimination Act

A Statement from Bishop Michael Stead, Chair of Freedom for Faith

All Australians should be deeply shocked at the discriminatory treatment of Andrew Thorburn. According to press reports Thorburn has been forced to resign one day after being appointed as the CEO of the Essendon Football Club on the basis of the mainstream religious beliefs of a church with which he is associated. Thorburn should not have been forced to choose between his religious beliefs and serving the Football Club that he loves and is so eminently qualified to serve.

Thorburn was forced to resign after activists scoured the sermon archives of Thorburn's church, and discovered sermons over the past decade that were not written by him or known to him. Some of those sermons condemned abortion and described homosexual sexual acts as sinful. These moral and religious beliefs are not "extreme" – they are mainstream beliefs which have been held for centuries by a wide variety of faith groups, including Christians, Jews, Muslims and Sikhs, and certainly in relation to abortion are also held as moral views by many non-religious Australians.

The freedom to hold and express a religious belief is a foundational human right, which Australia has committed to as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 18 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to hold a religious belief and to manifest that in worship, observance, practice and teaching. It further guarantees that "no one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice". It appears that Andrew Thorburn has been subject to coercion to resign because of his religious belief.

It is completely hypocritical that the Essendon Football Club has engaged in this religious discrimination as an expression of their commitment to "stamp out any discrimination based on race, sex, religion, gender, sexual identity or orientation, or physical or mental disability," as the club has claimed in its statement. The club's action in fact promotes discrimination based on religion. Freedom for Faith notes that no-one has alleged that Thorburn has discriminated against anyone who is gay or lesbian or who has had an abortion, including while leading several very large organisations in CEO roles across his career. He has been pushed out of his new role solely because of the moral and religious views expressed on a Church website with which he is associated.

In a statement by Dave Barham on behalf of the Board of the Essendon Football Club, Barham states that "Essendon is committed to providing an inclusive, diverse and a safe Club, where everyone is welcome and respected". This is manifestly untrue. This action shows there is no commitment by the Essendon Board to embrace a diversity of moral or religious views. How welcome and included will players, staff and fans who hold these



religious or moral views, or who are a member of the same Church as Thorburn, now feel at Essendon?

Australia has a long and proud tradition of respecting a diversity of points of view, especially on complex personal and moral matters. Notwithstanding deep differences, we have been able to live and work together with respect. But no longer in Victoria, it would appear.

Thorburn stated that he was forced to resign because “it became clear to me that my personal Christian faith is not tolerated or permitted in the public square, at least by some and perhaps by many.”

It is also very disturbing that the Premier of a State, who has been elected to form a government for all the people of that State, thought it appropriate to dismiss the religious beliefs of a significant number of people in his State as “absolutely appalling”, “hatred” and “bigotry”. It was also inappropriate for the Premier to have put pressure on the Essendon board, with his comments that he was a “somewhat disappointed Essendon supporter” because of Thorburn’s appointment given his religious views, and that “the appointment of a CEO to a club is a matter for the board of that football club”.

Freedom for Faith calls on the Albanese government to fulfil its election promise to implement a federal Religious Discrimination Bill as a matter of urgency, and to do this in such a way as to protect all Australian citizens from the kinds of religious discrimination, vilification and coercion that Andrew Thorburn has experienced.

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