

20 March 2025

Ms Zali Steggall OAM, MP
Member for Warringah
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By e-mail: zali.steggall.mp@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Steggall,

Faith Leader Questions for Ms Zali Steggall OAM– 2025 Election Campaign

As leaders of religious communities and faith traditions, we write to you in light of the approaching federal election. As leaders and representatives of our religious communities we would like to give you the opportunity to respond to questions concerning religious freedom that we have put to both the Labor Government and the Opposition.

There is a very real possibility that whichever party is successful this election will be governing from a minority position with the crossbench. Given the important role that you would play in that crossbench, we would like to know your positions in relation to freedom of religion and freedom of speech. We are therefore writing to you seeking your answers to our questions below so that our communities can understand your stance on issues that are of vital importance to our communities.

Our intention is to make this letter and your responses to it available to our faith communities, to better inform their choices at the next election. Thank you for considering these issues that are important to our faith communities.

1. During a meeting with key faith leaders on 12 April 2024 the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, made the commitment to those present that religious protections for faith groups ‘will not go backwards while I’m Prime Minister of Australia.’¹

Will you make the same commitment to the Australian people as a key part of your policy platform, should you play a role in the formation or operation of a minority government in the next term of Parliament?

2. On 09 February 2022 you voted for the complete repeal of protections afforded to faith-based schools by section 38 of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth)², which would render religious schools unable to preferentially hire teachers and staff that affirm the faith of the school as well as being unable to conduct school activities in accordance with their

¹ https://www.csa.edu.au/CSA/Resources-and-Media/Media-Centre/Media-Release/2024/Christian_Schools_Welcome_PMs_Commitment

² Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 09 February 2022, 282 (Ms Zali Steggall OAM, MP).

doctrines, tenets and beliefs free from threat of anti-discrimination claims. This position is antithetical to the continuing operation and welfare of faith-based institutions, including religious schools. You and other members of the crossbench have backed other similar reforms that will have detrimental impacts on the operations of religious institutions and schools.³

You opposed the extension of existing Federal anti-discrimination protections to people of religious faith and religious institutions in the last term of Government.⁴ The Labor Government and Opposition in the current term consulted with faith leaders in an effort to pass a bi-partisan Religious Discrimination Bill that would protect people of faith and religious bodies from discrimination (building upon the leadership and support the then Coalition Government offered the passage of such legislation through the House of Representatives in February 2022). This consultation necessarily included careful consideration of the existing protections for faith-based institutions in the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (SDA) that ensure these organisations can operate according to their religious convictions and give effect to the human rights of parents. Faith leaders, as reported in *The Australian*,⁵ put forward to both the Government and the Opposition detailed proposals that charted a way forward allowing the Government to pass laws ensuring that religious schools can preference employees who share their beliefs. Those proposals gave effect to Australian Law Reform Commissioner Justice Rothman's recommendation that religious schools be given a 'positive right'.⁶ The faith leaders' proposals removed existing broad exemptions within the Sex Discrimination Act and replaced them with targeted provisions to enable a religious educational institution to

³ See, eg, The Australian Greens 2025 Election Policy: Education <https://greens.org.au/policies/education>, point 28 under the heading 'Schools'. By way of further illustration, Helen Haines MP and Adam Bandt MP also voted on 09 February 2022 for complete repeal of the protections afforded to faith-based schools by section 38 of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) in respect of both staff, teaching and student conduct. The following independents have made statements that indicate they hold a similar position: Zoe Daniel: <https://zoedaniel.com.au/policies/lgbtqia-equality-and-inclusion/>; Monique Ryan: <https://aleph.org.au/2022/05/13/statement-dr-monique-ryan-independent-for-kooyong/>; Allegra Spender: <https://www.allegraspender.com.au/discrimination>; Kate Cheney: <https://x.com/chaneyforcurtin/status/1490855944590602241>. The following persons also supported the inclusion of additional attributes that would impact on the operations of religious institutions and schools by way of amendment to the then Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Bill 2022 on 07 November 2022: Allegra Spender, Kylea Tink, Monique Ryan, Zoe Daniel, Sophie Scamps, Kate Chaney, Adam Bandt, Stephen Bates. Max Chandler-Mather and Elizabeth Watson-Brown.

⁴ Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 09 February 2022, 256 (Ms Zali Steggall OAM, MP).

⁵ Rosie Lewis 'Catholic Church leaders say faith laws "going backwards"' *The Australian* (30 May 2024) <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/catholic-church-leaders-say-faith-laws-going-backwards/news-story/df9cbd237082ba297cf3ebadb5688597#:~:text=Two%20of%20Australia's%20most%20senior,go%20a%20long%20way%20backwards%E2%80%9D>; Mark Fowler 'Is religious discrimination reform to die without a whimper?' *The Australian* 21 August 2024 <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/is-religious-discrimination-reform-to-die-without-a-whimper/news-story/08b951f8929db4245785ea92082af444>

⁶ Justice Stephen Rothman 'Amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and proposals for Religious Discrimination Act' Notre Dame Sydney, Law School, Annual Religious Liberty Conference (12 April 2024) <https://www.aacs.net.au/international-context-religious-freedom>.

continue to employ staff who model and teach their beliefs and also to respond to conduct that would undermine their ethos.

Will you commit to the Australian people, particularly to people of faith, that the rights of religious individuals, institutions and schools will be protected if you play a role in the formation or operation of a minority government in the next term of Parliament? In particular, will you commit to support the legislating of a Religious Discrimination Bill and amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act in line with the proposals put forward by faith leaders if you play a role in the formation or operation of a minority government in the next term of Parliament?

3. Relevantly, we also note that the National Policy Platform of the current government contains various commitments that could impact detrimentally on religious institutions:
 - a. its commitment to the Australian Human Rights Commission Amendment Costs Protection Act 2024 (which is not supported by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's Respect@Work Report, notwithstanding the citation of that report in the Policy Platform);⁷ and
 - b. its commitment to consolidate existing anti-discrimination laws and conduct 'a review of existing exemptions to ensure that they do not prevent access to essential social services.'⁸ Such changes to religious charity provision of essential services could see faith-based charities lose their ability to maintain their religious character. The right of religious institutions to establish and maintain faith-based charities (sometimes delivering essential services) in accordance with their religious convictions (including schools) is protected in international law.⁹

We are further concerned by the following developments during the current term of government:

- a. the erosion of Human Rights protection in the proposed Australian Human Rights Act¹⁰ which provided limited protections to religious institutions and did not affirm the place of parental rights to ensure the religious and moral education of their children;
- b. the recommendation of the Productivity Commission to abolish the basic religious charity exception; and

⁷ Ibid 36, [63b].

⁸ Ibid 79, [59].

⁹ See, eg, UN General Assembly, *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*, A/RES/36/55, (25 November 1981), art 6(b); Fowler, Mark, 'Identifying Faith-Based Entities for the Purpose of Anti-Discrimination Law' in Paul T Babie, Neville G Rochow and Brett G Scharffs (eds), *Freedom of Religion or Belief* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020)

¹⁰ Here we are referring to the proposals put forward by the Australian Human Rights Commission and by the Parliamentary Joint Committee for Human Rights. See the concerns raised, for example, in the submissions to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights by Professor Nicholas Aroney, Professor Richard Ekins KC (Hon) and Dr Benjamin Saunders and by Associate Professor Mark Fowler here:

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Human_Rights/HumanRightsFramework/Submissions.

- c. the failure to progress the prior Human Rights Legislation Bill 2022 moved by the preceding Liberal Government, that passed the House of Representatives, which would have recognised the ‘indivisibility and universality of human rights, and their equal status in international law’ (an important clarification that the Expert Panel on Religious Freedom sought to ensure that religious freedom is not treated as a second order right), protected religious institutions and schools that hold a traditional view of marriage from the loss of their charity status, and clarify that chapels on school grounds are within the exception within the *Marriage Act 1961*.

Will you commit to addressing our concerns raised by each of these limitations on the manifestation of religious freedom through institutions?

4. Faith Leaders are supportive of limited and appropriately drafted civil anti-vilification provisions. We believe it should be unlawful to intimidate, harass or vilify (incite hatred) on the basis of religious belief or non-belief. However, it must not be unlawful merely to “insult” or “offend”. Some key religious beliefs are offensive to adherents of other religions, and a religious vilification law that made it unlawful to cause offense because of a religious belief would be a blasphemy law by another name. Further, the requirement that a person ‘engage in the conduct reasonably and in good faith’ requires clarification to ensure that ‘reasonable’ does not require a judge to assess whether a religious belief itself is reasonable. ‘Good faith’ should not require a religious institution to demonstrate ‘fidelity or loyalty’ to the principles of anti-discrimination law.¹¹ According to the legal definition of ‘harass’ it could be unlawful if the preaching of religious truth led a person to be ‘disturbed persistently’.¹² Undefined, the word ‘intimidate’ may have a similarly detrimental effect on religious teaching in this country. Consistent with the reforms recently implemented in Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory, the prohibition should also be subject to the general religious bodies exception for acts done in conformity with religious beliefs or to avoid injury to religious susceptibilities.

Would a Religious Discrimination Bill supported by you include a civil prohibition on religious vilification, such that it is unlawful to engage in public conduct, on the ground of a person’s religious belief or activity, that a reasonable person would consider would intimidate, harass or vilify that person in a way that addresses the above concerns?

¹¹ This is the standard applied for the purposes of the ‘good faith’ exception in Commonwealth vilification law, see *Bropho v Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* (2004) 135 FCR 105 ([102] French J).

¹² The Federal Court has provided the following definition of harassment (*Re Susan Hall; Dianne Susan Oliver and Karyn Reid v A & A Sheiban Pty Ltd; Dr Atallah Sheiban and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* (1989) 85 ALR 503, 531; [1989] FCA 72; 20 FCR 217 (15 March 1989) [9]):

The word “harass” implies the instillation of fear or the infliction of damage; as is indicated by the definition of the term in the Macquarie Dictionary: “1. to trouble by repeated attacks, incursions, etc., as in war or hostilities; harry; raid. 2. to disturb persistently; torment, as with troubles, cares, etc.”

5. The incidence of state and federal legislation that undermine free speech is alarming. Changes to the anti-vilification regime in Queensland,¹³ proposed changes in Victoria,¹⁴ changes to federal criminal hate speech laws,¹⁵ changes to privacy laws¹⁶ and misinformation laws (including the failed Communications Legislation Amendment (Combating Misinformation and Disinformation) Bill 2024 and the Basic Online Safety Expectations (BOSE) Determination), and ongoing proposals in various other states to amend anti-vilification laws are eroding the free speech of ordinary Australians in the absence of robust exceptions. These laws place the validity of opinions at the whim of bureaucrats or allow judges to scrutinise the validity of religious doctrine.

The recently enacted Criminal Code Amendment (Hate Crimes) Bill 2024 (Cth) ably illustrates the pressures being placed upon free speech. Senator Matthew Canavan proposed an amendment to that Bill to clarify that ‘force’ and ‘violence’ mean ‘physical violence’, and thus do not include psychological injury. This amendment addressed concerns held by various of the signatories to this letter that the Bill would impact on the teaching of, and practices consistent with, traditional beliefs on gender and sexuality.¹⁷

Will you commit to legislating Senator Canavan’s clarification should you play a role in the formation or operation of a minority government in the next term of Parliament? Will you also commit to protecting free speech in Australia by not introducing laws that will further erode religious freedom and freedom of speech and improving general understanding in Australia of the importance of religious freedom and free speech for a prosperous and flourishing Australia?

6. Both the Federal Government and state and territory governments continue to introduce new laws that erode essential human rights. Freedom of conscience, thought and religion, freedom of association and the right to peaceful assembly are being incrementally undermined in Australia. **Will you :**
- a. **increase protections for freedoms of conscience, thought, religion, association and peaceful assembly in accordance with its international commitments under**

¹³ Respect at Work and Other Matters Amendment Bill 2024 (Qld). See the issues identified at <https://contactyourmp.org.au/qlld-ad-respect/>.

¹⁴ <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/victoria/allan-government-faces-showdown-with-faith-groups-over-hate-laws-20241115-p5kqz2.html>

¹⁵ Criminal Code Amendment (Hate Crimes) Bill 2024 (Cth), <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r7240>

¹⁶ Privacy and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024, <https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_LEGislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r7249>.

¹⁷ See, eg, Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs Inquiry into Criminal Code Amendment (Hate Crimes) Bill 2024 (Cth) Submission 4; Combined Churches, Response to Questions on Notice. See also the submission to the same Inquiry from Freedom for Faith on behalf of Australian Baptist Ministries, Australian Christian Churches, the Anglican Church Diocese of Sydney, the Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Christian Schools Australia and the Australian Association of Christian Schools.

Articles 18, 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;

- b. **commit not to introduce legislation that will further erode these freedoms?**
 - c. **commit to supporting the establishment of a parliamentary inquiry into how Australia's human rights obligations are not being met and how those freedoms are being eroded?**
7. The recent findings in the case of *Tickle v Giggle* demonstrated that the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth) now poses a risk to people of faith, faith-based organisations and women's only services and facilities. Many religions hold beliefs and engage in religious practices that differentiate on the basis of biological sex, but the judgment in *Tickle v Giggle* has interpreted 'sex' to be non-binary and changeable and not to mean 'biological sex', which is contrary to treaties such as the CEDAW and the ICCPR.

Will you commit to ensuring that there are protections for women's only services and facilities and faith-based institutions in the Sex Discrimination Act so that they can continue to engage in practices, including religious practices, that differentiate on the basis of biological sex?

Signed,

The Rt Rev Dr Michael Stead

Bishop of South Sydney
Anglican Diocese of Sydney



Imam Shadi Alsuleiman

President
Australian National Imams Council



Robert Gregory

Chief Executive Officer
Australian Jewish Association



Dr Rachel Carling

Director of Public Policy
Christian Schools Australia



Rev David Burke

Moderator General
Presbyterian Church of Australia



Vanessa Cheng

Executive Officer
Australian Association of Christian Schools



Pastor Terry Johnson

President for the Australian
Union Conference
Seventh-day Adventist Church



Pastor Mark Edwards

Religious Freedom Representative
Australian Christian Churches



Hussein Faraj

President
United Shia Islamic Foundation



Rev Mark Wilson

National Ministries Director
Australian Baptist Ministries



Surinder Jain

Vice President Interfaith and Hindu
Hub
Hindu Council of Australia



Richard Botta

Senior Pastor
C3 Church Carlingford and
Wentworthville



Abdullah Kahn

Chair
Islamic Schools Association of
Australia



Dr Ali Al Samail

Chief Executive Officer
Australian Ahl Al Bait Islamic Centre



Rev Eun Chan Sung

President
The Council of the Minister of
Korean Churches in Sydney
Australia



Rev Billy Lee

Chairman
Sydney Chinese Christian
Churches Association



Mike Southon

Executive Director
Freedom for Faith



Rev Dr Ross Clifford

Executive Director
NSW Council of Churches



Rev Bruce Bennett

Acting National Director
Fellowship of Independent
Evangelical Churches



Dr Byung Guen Kim

President
Sydney Holy City Movement



Dr Mohamed Mohideen OAM

President
Islamic Council of Victoria



Pastor Paul McCarthy

President
Foursquare Australia

