

To [name], MP for [local federal member]

Dear [name],

I recognise that balancing the rights and protections of all is complex as has been seen in the recent debate on the Religious Discrimination Bill, and I hope support for such legislation remains a bipartisan matter and is not politicised in the coming election campaign.

I am writing, however, to ask that the Labor Party reconsider its position on the removal of the exemptions in the Sex Discrimination Act for religious and particularly Christian organisations, not in relation to the enrolment of students, but in relation to the employment of staff. All the Church or Christian schools I know are actively committed to supporting all their students, but the capacity of institutions, whether educational or health, to prioritise the employment of those committed to their beliefs and mission is fundamental to their maintaining their distinctive ethos and purpose, and to schools providing the education in Christian teaching which parents desire. This includes being able to employ those committed to a distinctive Christian sexual morality which sees all sexual activity outside marriage as sin, and marriage as only between a man and a woman. To be unable to do this, and to be unable to determine for themselves the roles where such a commitment to their beliefs is a condition of employment, will be the beginning of the end for distinctive Christian schooling. Is this the Labor Party's desire? Further, for a Government to decide which roles in a Christian school need a commitment to the school's doctrinal position, and which don't, as the Victorian Labor Government has done, is to come perilously close to the Government giving itself authority to arbitrate on religious matters, to saying for a faith what the scope of that faith's practice can extend to. In removing these exemptions is it the Federal Labor Party's desire to also involve itself in such judgments?

I am also asking that protections for statements of belief not be watered down. What happened to Bishop Porteous for articulating Catholic doctrine to his community should not happen again, and while such instances are infrequent at present the possibility of being taken before an anti-discrimination board for articulating historic Christian doctrine, especially Christian doctrine on sexual morality and gender, remains. The threat of harassment by process has a chilling effect on free discussion and open teaching of Christian truth and stifles public debate.

These are not small matters for me and those who believe as I do. I am glad that at the moment the process is paused and there is the opportunity for further consideration of what is a difficult balance between competing interests. I hope especially that more thought is given to the proposed amendment to the Sex Discrimination Act which has far reaching consequences, including for institutions like Theological Colleges as well as schools. If we are to be a genuinely pluralistic society then Christians must continue to be able to state their beliefs clearly and to associate together in creating and sustaining institutions that express and promote their faith. I hope there will be bipartisan agreement on this for Christians have made and will continue to make their beneficial contribution to society by being distinctively Christian, and humbly request that in the months ahead you advocate on behalf of your Christian constituents both for Christian institutions to be able to retain their distinctive ethos by being able to prioritise the employment of those committed to their beliefs and mission and for the free expression of Christian teaching, including in the area of sexual morality and gender.

Yours faithfully,

Neil Chambers