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Mark Dreyfus wants 'line-by-line' response from Michaelia Cash on draft religious discrimination laws

By ROSIE LEWIS

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Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus says the Coalition [must deliver a “line-by-line” response to Labor’s draft religious discrimination reforms](#) in order for the overhaul to progress, leaving open the option of pursuing the “unfinished project” in the next term of parliament.

Addressing the National Press Club in Canberra, Mr Dreyfus declared [his opposition counterpart Michaelia Cash had “refused to engage”](#) and he [didn’t count the public statements she’d made as a proper response](#).

“What we’ve said right from the start is we’re looking for an enduring reform here, we’re looking to give protections to staff and students in religious schools and protections to people of faith,” Mr Dreyfus said.

“Working on that notion of getting an enduring reform, I gave to the opposition, to Mr (Peter) Dutton and Senator Cash back in March the bills that we hope to bring to the parliament.

“We’re waiting for line-by-line type of engagement. That’s what normally should occur. That’s the response that we gave to the former Morrison government when we were in opposition when they brought a bill to the parliament. I’m waiting for that kind of engagement. It hasn’t happened yet.”

But Senator Cash, the opposition's legal affairs spokeswoman and a former attorney-general, said Mr Dreyfus already had a line-by-line response from faith groups that included drafting changes to the legislation.

“As we have consistently said, he must redraft his legislation to take the suggestions from faith groups into account, and release it publicly for all Australians to see. That has been our clear position for many weeks now,” she said.

There has been no progress on Labor’s draft religious discrimination laws since late May when talks between Mr Dreyfus and Senator Cash broke down and Anthony Albanese said he wouldn’t pursue the changes without bipartisan support.

Some Labor MPs are keen for the government to drop the draft laws, noting the Prime Minister and Mr Dreyfus don’t want religious discrimination politicised.

Pressed on whether Labor would make another election promise to pursue religious discrimination reforms next term if bipartisanship in this parliament couldn’t be achieved, Mr Dreyfus said: “We think this is worth doing.

“That’s why we voted in favour of a religious discrimination bill on in February of 2022. It’s why we moved amendments to that bill, some of which were successful because Liberal members of parliament in the Morrison government crossed the floor. This is an unfinished project.

“The reason for wanting to make sure that there is bipartisan approval of what we bring to the parliament is that we don’t want a religious discrimination act in Australia that is subject to change on a change of government.”

Christian Schools Australia urged the Prime Minister to intervene directly to ensure his government delivered on its election commitment to strengthen religious freedom protections.

“Earlier today the Attorney-General indicated that they have yet to receive a formal response from the Coalition regarding the proposed draft laws. The government and the opposition have received from faith leaders detailed amendments, the kind of ‘line-by-line engagement’ that the Attorney-General indicated he is seeking,” the Christian schools association said.

“The opposition legal affairs spokeswoman has indicated support for the proposals from faith leaders. We are so close to having a historic settlement of this contentious issue.”

The Australian [revealed in May](#) the Australian Catholic Bishop Conference had put forward a detailed proposal to the Albanese government to address significant concerns the church has with the draft religious discrimination laws, warning as the legislation stood faith groups “would go a long way backwards”.

The Anglican Church has put forward a similar plan.



ROSIE LEWIS POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT

Rosie Lewis is The Australian's Political Correspondent. She began her career at the paper in Sydney in 2011 as a video journalist and has been in the federal parliamentary press gallery since 2014. Lewis made her mark in Canberra after breaking story after story about the political rollercoaster unleashed by the Senate crossbench of the 44th parliament. More recently, her national reporting includes exclusives on the dual citizenship fiasco, women in parliament and the COVID-19 pandemic. Lewis has covered policy in-depth across social services, health, indigenous affairs, agriculture, communications, education, foreign affairs and workplace relations.

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