

Christian schools disappointed in ALRC review delay

30 August 2019

Whilst welcoming endeavours to better protect religious freedom, the Australian Association of Christian Schools (AACS) fears that recent government announcements could leave schools in legal limbo. Yesterday, we saw the Attorney-General Christian Porter release a draft Religious Discrimination Bill and received news that the Australian Law Reform Commission's (ALRC) review of our school protections has been narrowed and delayed significantly. The ALRC will now not report until December 2020.

The AACS urges the Attorney-General to take a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to both the Religious Discrimination Bill and the ALRC review, to ensure that specific provision is made to preserve and protect the ability of Christian education schools to teach in accordance with the religious convictions of their stakeholders.

AACS remains committed to consulting with Government, Opposition and stakeholders to make these views known and work towards resolution.

AACS has reservations regarding potential unintended consequences of the draft Bill and ALRC delay, including that:

1. Vague notions of harm and vilification in the religious discrimination Bill could still be used against classical Christian teaching in schools;
2. Consideration may not be given to alternative frameworks to protect freedom of association other than through problematic 'exemptions'; and
3. The narrowing and delay of the ALRC review could mean a watering down of specific protections for faith-based schools;

AACS Executive Officer, Alithea Westerman, said "the delay in delivering the ALRC review extends the uncertainty for Christian education schools who simply want their ability to be authentic Christian education communities protected. All of this is taking place in the context of other jurisdictions interfering with freedom of association".

Independent schools play an important role in upholding diversity and freedom of thought in Australia, particularly for minorities.

Mrs Westerman said that "We cannot have freedom of thought in our country without wide educational choice to reflect this long-held freedom. If independent schools lose their point of difference and are unable to practice and teach their different educational philosophies or faiths – government will be the arbiter of morality and conscience."

We look forward to discussing the Bill with the Government, Opposition and other fellow stakeholders in the coming weeks.

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