

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 1011

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS, AND DISCRIMINATION

Public schools are open to all children teachers and parents, regardless of class, creed, culture – or gender. Private schools discriminate on all criteria. When their right to discriminate is questioned, a cry of ‘Religious Liberty’ is trumpeted in the corridors of power.

The Law Reform Commission has recently recommended that religious schools should lose their unfettered right to dismiss teachers and expel students over questions of sexuality or gender identity. More than 20 religious organisations, from Christian, Muslim and Jewish groups urged Albanese to reject the recommendations of the Law Reform Commission. They promised to oppose any such move.

The Albanese government has come up with a solution for maintaining the ‘status quo’, or rather, sitting on the fence. Mark Dreyfus, the Attorney General released the recommendations from the Australian Law Commission saying that

‘No Australian should be discriminated against because of who they are or what they believe’, but added that *‘bipartisan support for solutions is essential’*.

In other words, because both Labor and Coalition politicians are divided on the issue, nothing can happen. (*The Age* Saturday March 23, 2024)

The right to of one third of Australian schools – religious schools – to discriminate against our children comes at a very high price to the taxpayer. Our wealthy religious corporations in Australia have become a State within a State, demanding to be exempt, not only from taxes, but from the law itself. Periodically this situation is revealed in reports in the Media.

A Christian economist, Brendan Long has researched Catholic Church finances, and John Ferguson reported on these in *The Australian* 9 June 2023. The estimated Catholic Church wealth in Australia is \$500 billion, and Catholic schools, hospitals, the Australian Catholic University, and St Vincent de Paul Society generate \$23 billion annual revenue which Dr Long describes as ‘rivers of gold’. The gross revenue of Catholic education, in Australia in 2019 was \$13.7 billion , 9.8 billion of which was direct recurrent government funding. This did not include capital funding and taxation exemptions which amount to

many billions more. These corporate revenue flow to Church bodies which have independence under canon law.

The total bill to the taxpayer of direct school funding to religious schools is now in excess of 18 billion dollars in recurrent funds alone. And there is minimal accountability.

In the *Age* of Saturday March 23, for example, we discover that the ATO has raided the officers of a cult known as The Plymouth Brethren which, among other enterprises runs a school system known as '*OneSchool Global*'.

So, in Australia, we are confronted with a swiftly growing cancer in the body politic.

We have vastly wealthy religious bodies demanding 'religious liberty' parading as discrimination against children, teachers and parents.

Meanwhile the Australian taxpayer is denied the religious liberty of voluntarily paying for the belief of their choice – while being forced to pay taxes for religious groups with power to discriminate against their children.

Perhaps Australian governments need to return to the principle, not of discrimination, but of separation of religion from the state. That is the only way forward for true religious liberty which is a matter of conscience, not a matter of raiding the public Treasury for taxpayer subsidy of corporate wealth.

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