I am writing to voice my concerns regarding the proposed Religious Discrimination Bill 2019. The proposed bill, in its current form not only seeks to provide protections for Australian’s to practice their faith, but it details various ways in which religion can also be used to justify discriminatory behaviour and activity aimed at a range of minority groups including the LGBTQI community, people from marginalised faiths, women and people living with a disability.

The idea behind the bill is sound: add the protected ground of “religious belief or activity” to existing federal discrimination protections for race, sex, disability and age.

Most would agree it’s wrong to discriminate against someone for the reason that they are of a certain faith – or, indeed, of no faith.

But this bill goes much further than other discrimination laws and weakens existing protections for LGBTIQ+ people, women, people with disabilities, and those from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds.

There is a fundamental difference between a person’s right to express their beliefs and being able to use personal beliefs to judge, vilify or discriminate against another person. The activities covered in this proposed bill, while detailing protection mechanisms for individuals who may face discrimination due to their religion also allows for protections for those same individuals to use their religious beliefs to discriminate against others. This is not aligned with our other existing anti-discrimination legislation and as such should be removed.

In reviewing the proposed bill, it seems that the following would be made legal:

- Health care withheld or denied based on the healthcare professionals own personal beliefs about another human being’s beliefs, appearance, identity or activities,
- Educators losing their job based on their employers personal beliefs regarding the educators beliefs, appearance or identity rather than performance and ability
- Individuals denied goods and services based on a suppliers personal beliefs regarding a customer’s beliefs, appearance or identity

We have already seen firsthand the impact that allowing religion to be used as a weapon can have. Having people’s personal worth debated publicly and without protections during the Marriage Equality campaign and watching LGBTQI youth be objectified during the debate around Safe Schools was arduous and I witnessed many people be rejected by family and friends, overcome by mental health challenges and worse. A recent Just.Equal survey revealed that more than 80% of LGBTQI people in Australia are feeling worse now as the parameters of what constitutes Religious Freedom are being explored, than they did
during the 2017 Marriage Equality postal survey. While there has been success in several aspects of LGBTQI equality, many have not yet or may never recover.

This bill will undo so much progress achieved in creating a more equal and inclusive Australia.

It is my expectation that the government of Australia should be striving to legislate protections for all Australians, this bill fails to achieve this. I do not support the proposed Religious Discrimination Bill 2019.

Robyn McLean
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Free to be You Newcastle
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