

Equal Opportunity (Misc) Amendment Bill – February 21, 2007

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond): As a member of the Liberal Party I cannot possibly support the bill because of the obvious effect it will have on education and religious freedoms. No doubt, all MPs, including government MPs, have received dozens—even hundreds—of messages of protest. When will this government start listening to its people? All living creatures hear, but not many have the ability to listen. The difference lies in the ability to understand, interpret and respond to the information gathered when you listen, rather than just react to noise that you hear. This government seems to have perfected the art of hearing without listening.

Many messages have been widely circulated, but I have had a great many more from people visiting my office, phoning me, catching me in the street and at social events. I will tell the house what some people are saying about this bill:

1. An atheist applied to teach in a Christian school and was rejected because his/her beliefs and values were opposite in some ways to the beliefs of the school. He/she could bring a charge against the principal who would then have to defend the case at his/her own expense. Further, if found to be guilty, he/she would have to pay the penalty the law imposed.

2. I believe it will be the beginning of the end of free speech and the end of freedom of religion.

3. It seems that even natural justice would be denied those who are accused as the onus of proof would be reversed.

4. Compromises the freedom of speech our society enjoys and to ensure that our society allows our religious institutions to speak unhindered by fear of prosecution.

5. Deeply distressed about the new bill. Things that I use in my everyday speech to my children might cause someone around me to be offended, but we as English and Christians are not allowed to be offended by anything that another group of people, other than ourselves, have to say.

6. Serious and dangerous implications for freedom of speech and religion in this state. Stop this patronising bill that treats us as children. Do what you were voted in to do and respect and protect our freedoms.

7. The negative changes it would bring to our Aussie lifestyle, the ability to say what I think.

8. Truth should always be able to be used as a defence.

9. Our nation is becoming more and more lawless as a result of cunningly worded amendments to laws that have served our nation well for many generations.

10. This bill frightens me.

The response from the public has been constant and the messages always the same—and very clear. People fear this bill and mistrust the author's motives. This bill challenges the very values on which this great country was founded. In attempting to appease one section of the community, we are alienating another. Many people feel they will be the new oppressed. Everything they say, every word they speak and every thought they have is open to accusations of discrimination. These are the descendants of our country's founders.

Many others have come here to escape the same sort of harsh regulation and intolerance they found in their native land. Are we to toss them from the frying pan into the fire? In our efforts to promote a more tolerant society we are imposing more restrictions on its people. The result will reduce tolerance by causing people to fear their neighbours, fostering confusion and mistrust as people begin to resent not feeling free

to speak their mind. Our tolerance of others is allowing and encouraging them to become less tolerant of us.

Many of our traditional community leaders, teachers and ministers of religion, using words their teachers and mentors have used for years, now fear they will be called to explain those words in lengthy, expensive and unjust court proceedings. It will be no surprise to find in a few years' time that many of our best and wisest community leaders have withdrawn from public life, and who could blame them?

Our right to free expression of opinions is what makes this country what it is. If we did not have it, we would not even be here today debating it.