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The Expert Panel on Religious Freedom  
C/O Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet  
PO Box 6500  
Canberra ACT 2600, Australia

Dear panel members

It has been some time in Australia since we have had such a volatile debate that has pitted two groups in Australian society so against each other; the LGBTI community and conservative Christians.

LGBTI people were campaigning for equality and the right to marry the person they love and conservative Christians seemed intent on clouding the issues by fear mongering about long term consequences and religious freedom. As soon as the postal survey was announced Liberal back-bencher, Tony Abbott, was out the front of Parliament House warning Australians this wasn't about same-sex marriage. 'If you are worried about religious freedom and freedom of speech, vote No.' he told reporters repeatedly.

I use the term 'conservative Christians' as it became clear early in the debate that the majority of people who call themselves Christian in Australia were for marriage equality and not subscribing to the sensationalist predictions of the conservative lobby groups.

During the postal survey we did see inappropriate behaviour on both sides of the debate but it appears from data that LGBTI people suffered the most as their lives, relationships and community were consistently spoken about in disparaging terms and, even at times, falsehoods circulated to back up the No campaigns message. Giving people more freedom to do this will be harmful to LGBTI people, particularly the young.

If one was to believe the message preached by Christian conservatives, one would have to believe that the LGBTI community and individuals were all political subversives and insidious/deceitful social reconstructionists.

In Australia, freedom to practice one's religion is already enshrined in the law. Ministers of religion have always had the right to refuse to marry couples they didn't want to. Religious protections and exemptions already exist. I don't believe we need any additional legislation or changes.

Let's face it, conservative Christians don't like gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. There has been a long history of this. I'm old enough to remember the days of Anita Bryant and her fight to legislate discrimination against homosexuals.

As was happening after the birth of the gay rights movement, in Dade County, Florida, like other places in the US, a law was passed in 1977, that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Up to this point being out or people discovering you were gay, could mean being sacked from a job or a landlord refusing to rent you a home or apartment. Anita Bryant, media person and

evangelical mother of four, rallied religious and conservative supporters under the banner of 'Save Our Children'. And with that fear campaign the anti-discrimination law was repealed. The voting outcome was not unlike our postal survey actually but the opposite way (69% to 31%). For the next 20 years gay and lesbian people in Florida lived with a law that said they could be fired or denied services because of their sexual orientation. You didn't have to actually do anything illegal or inappropriate, you just had to be....you know.....gay.

The Anita Bryant example is just one of many I could give that demonstrates the recent opposition and campaign by Christian conservatives is nothing new. It is just history repeating itself.

Our anti-discrimination legislation rightly covers sexual orientation and we should not take a step backwards as they did in Dade county in the 1970s.

The example is frequently given of wedding services such as venues, florists, caterers, photographers and printers refusing service to same sex couples on the basis of their anti-gay religious beliefs. This appears very hypocritical. Do they question every person who wants to use their service and ask them questions like. "Are you both virgins?" "Have you been living together before you get married?" No they don't. Why? Because it's rude and actually none of their business. But yet it IS against their Christian beliefs that say no sex outside of marriage. They provide the service without so much of blink of the eye or a twinge of conscience. It is hypocritical to target just one group of people who don't fit into your belief system and conveniently ignore the rest. It is most likely more about a homophobic attitude than a Christian belief.

In Australia, equality and fairness are foundations in our society. To erode these by giving additional protections based on an individuals religious belief would be detrimental. I'm sure none of us can imagine a business owner in Australia being allowed to say 'I won't serve you because you're black, a Moslem, a Jew, a woman.' Imagine if people are allowed to do this on the basis of their belief my sexual orientation is a sin.

This push for more religious freedoms seems more about their loss of privilege in the community than about their freedom. When you're used to privilege equality feels like discrimination and opposition like bullying.

Personally I believe the conservative Christians desire to discriminate against same sex couples and LGBTI individuals is completely incongruous with the teachings of Jesus and spirit of the gospel (see attached What did Jesus say about religious freedom). Their continued campaign in this area will only do harm to their cause and further damage the already tarnished reputation of the Christian church.

Should you wish to discuss this further I am more than happy to do so.

Sincerely

**Anthony Venn-Brown**

**Founder and CEO of Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International (ABBI)**

Author of '[A Life of Unlearning - a preacher's struggle with his homosexuality, church and faith](#)'

Honoured to be voted one of the [25 Most Influential Gay & Lesbian Australians](#) (2007 & 2009), finalist for the 2011 ACON Community Hero Award and winner of 2015 ACON's Health and Wellbeing Award.

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*Ambassadors & Bridge Builders International's mission is to create understanding and acceptance for LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) people, empower community members and build bridges with religious organisations and leaders*

