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Scott Morrison pledges bipartisan approach on religious freedoms

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The prime minister, [Scott Morrison](#), says he wants to work “carefully” with MPs and Labor to finalise the Coalition’s plans to protect religious freedoms, saying the “deeply personal” issue should not be politicised.

After [calls from conservative MPs for the government to look at going further than its election pledge to introduce a religious discrimination bill](#), Morrison has invited MPs to attend workshops being held by the attorney general, Christian Porter, on the Coalition’s proposed response.


“I do not want religion to be an issue that divides Australians, it is deeply personal for people, I want to work through it in a way that enhances unity, not for political purposes,” Morrison told MPs, according to a government spokesman.

The prime minister also said he wanted to work with Labor on the best way to ensure religious freedoms are protected, after [the opposition reported that some faith-based communities were concerned about the party's position on issues such as abortion and euthanasia.](#)

The legislation flagged by the government during the election would make it unlawful to discriminate against people on the ground of their religious belief or activity (including lack of religious belief), and would also establish a new role for a freedom of religion commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission.

A group of conservative MPs, including Concetta Fierravanti-Wells and Barnaby Joyce, have advocated for a new law to grant positive rights of religious expression, citing the case of Israel Folau as an example of why the law needs to be strengthened.

Porter has previously said the government's proposal would be a "basic" bill that would "follow the basic architecture of discrimination bills" by defining religion as a protected attribute. On Tuesday he told MPs that the legislation was "deeply technical", suggesting he may be prepared to go further.

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He will begin a series of workshops with MPs this week, which Morrison said would help finalise the Coalition's position.

Conservative ACT senator Zed Seselja said that nobody was drawing conclusions about the legislation yet, saying the party was "grappling" with how best to legislate to protect faith-based organisations, and the "complex" situation facing Folau.

"I don't think any law will easily fix this," he told the ABC. "I think we should pursue laws that protect against unfair treatment, but no law will perfectly be able to deal with these issues."

The Labor leader, [Anthony Albanese](#), told MPs on Monday that the party should consult widely on the issue of religious discrimination but has flagged the opposition could support new protections.

The shadow attorney general, Mark Dreyfus, said Labor welcomed Morrison's pledge to work together on a religious discrimination bill.

"We await such an invitation from the government," he said. "Once Labor receives the legislation, we will consult widely and follow the usual decision-making processes."

Equality Australia's director of legal advocacy, Lee Carnie, said the delay to the legislation, originally flagged for this week, provided more time to get the balance right.

“There is no question that our laws should ensure that all people are protected from discrimination,” Carnie said. “As a community who has too often experienced the harmful effects of discrimination, we stand with people of faith in their calls for greater protection under the law.”

But they called on the government to engage directly with the LGBTIQ community and women's groups who were “most at risk of experiencing discrimination by religious groups based on religious beliefs.”

“We hold grave concerns that if this legislation is not crafted carefully it will hand a license to discriminate to religious organisations,” they said.
