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Response to: Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010

Submission made by: Pastor Rob Norman

Authorized by and on behalf of: The Members of Southland Vineyard Church Inc, Adelaide, South Australia

We believe the proposed *Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010* introduces more problems than solutions; more questions than answers as it seeks to define what a public benefit is in relation to religious groups. Australia has long upheld the principles of religious freedom, indeed many of our early settlers, particularly in South Australia, came from countries where religious freedoms had been severely violated. Historically religious groups have enjoyed Tax Exemption which has allowed them to build sufficient infrastructure to uphold and pursue their religious observances. Without Tax Exemption the large majority of religious groups would struggle to fund such activities as building programs and maintenance, staffing, statutory compliance and administration.

We often hear the term "separation" in matters of Church and State when it is perceived that religious ideals are brought into the political arena. We believe that if the Government "tests" religious groups for their contribution to society using definitions prescribed by Parliament, this would in fact be violating the principal of "separation" as well. We do not believe it is the role of Government to "test" which particular religious activities are beneficial and which are not unless such views incite or evoke illegal activity. Many of the contributions of religion cannot be simply quantified as direct benefits to the wider community. Religious groups must continue to be free to pursue any religious activity that is within our legal system without penalty or discrimination. Spirituality is and has always been important to the fabric of Australian society. During wartime and past definitive moments in Australia's history, such as the birth of federation, religion has played an important role in strengthening our resolve to survive and become a great nation. We believe religion still plays an important role in supporting and strengthening Australian values.

By his own admission Senator Xenophon's motivation for introducing this bill is to address allegations raised in relation to activities of the Church of Scientology. The introduction of such a broadly discriminatory Bill, which is motivated by the activities of a very small minority of groups, is akin to using a chain saw to perform micro-surgery. We believe Australia needs a more direct approach to the alleged criminal activities of individual groups. The allegations Mr. Xenophon raises are well documented and widely reported and it would be more appropriate to instigate action against these alleged criminal activities than it would be to place the burden of justification on all religious groups.

If a test is to be applied to religious groups it should be limited to questions of Law, i.e., "Are the activities of this group within the Law". In cases where it is proven that certain religious groups are conducting illegal activities their tax exemption status could be suspended and depending on legal findings, reinstated only after appropriate due legal process.

Yours faithfully,



Rob Norman
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