

07/06/2010

Dear Sir/Madam,

I write in support of the Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010.

As a secular country the basis for government funding of religious organisations is somewhat dubious. If however we are to accept that the government provides funding for these organisations on the basis that they provide a tangible benefit to the community, it is logical that these benefits be subject to evaluation and not simply assumed as a direct result of the nature of the organisation applying for them. To provide taxpayer funds to organisations without justification provides an environment conducive to the kind of secrecy we have seen surrounding borderline groups such as Scientology and the Exclusive Brethren. In other areas of society the trade off for tax concessions is transparency. Should these organisations not wish to provide that transparency, that is their own affair, but they should not be able to receive taxpayer funds while their operations are shrouded in secrecy.

It is also inappropriate that the government should provide both grants and tax concessions to organisations seeking exemptions from the Equal Opportunity Act in order to discriminate against the community they claim to be providing a benefit to. While, as private organisations they may have cause to claim that discrimination against groups or individuals is necessary to remain faithful to their belief system, they should not be receiving taxpayer funded financial benefit while doing so. They may indeed be providing much needed social support services, particularly in areas where government has failed to provide adequate, secular services, however the question must be asked, should religious organisations providing community services have the right to deny service to those in the community who do not share their views. While they may be well within their rights as a private organisation to refuse to give abortion or contraception referrals within their hospitals or refuse to provide support services to members of the gay community, once they have accepted community funds to provide emergency pregnancy or psychological counselling services, surely they have a duty to provide services to the whole of that community, not just those sections of it that they approve. Do we then accept partial community benefit as good enough, or do we require that if they are to accept secular financial advantage that they have a duty equal to secular providers?

It is eminently reconcilable for Australia to be a society that values freedom of thought, association and belief without necessarily funding the organisations that subscribe to those beliefs. Indeed that government felt apparently no conflict between granting \$96 million to the Catholic World Youth Day and nothing at all to the recent Atheist Convention would indicate a certain double standard when it comes to promoting a free exchange of ideas.

While I am perfectly amenable to the idea of religious institutions receiving credit for genuine contributions to the community, and there are many examples of this, I believe that is irresponsible to grant concessions without genuine reflection on the nature and impact on the community of an organisation's operations. Lastly I believe it is unfair to those organisations who do work tirelessly for the public good to be lumped in with those of shadier operations who will not disclose information, or who are unwilling to put their names to their actions, both social and political, instead misrepresenting themselves

through the creation of dummy company names and channelling funds in a way that is unhealthy to open, honest debate. This kind of dishonesty should not be tacitly approved through the provision of publically funded financial advantage.

I thank you for your time and strongly urge you to consider these points and the amendment at hand.