

Australian 'religious freedom' review prompts discrimination row

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The Australian government looks set to allow religious schools that receive public funds to dismiss teachers for their sexuality nationwide after leaks from an official review of 'religious freedom' emerged.

Last week leaks [revealed](#) that the Ruddock review would recommend allowing religious schools to turn away pupils and staff on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or relationship status.

In a subsequent [statement](#) Australia's prime minister, Scott Morrison, said he would bring forward legal amendments to ensure schools cannot turn away students on the basis of their sexuality. His statement made no mention of the rights of LGBT+ staff.

The Ruddock review into 'religious freedom' was set up in the aftermath of last year's referendum vote to legalise marriage equality for same-sex couples in Australia. Morrison has said he will make the full report public towards the end of the year, along with the government's response.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the review will recommend amending Australia's Sex Discrimination Act to allow religious schools to discriminate if certain conditions are met.

The discrimination would need to be "founded in the precepts of the religion". The school would have to have a publicly available policy outlining its position and provide it to current and prospective students, parents and employees.

The review added that schools would have to have "regard for the best interests of the child as the primary consideration in its conduct" when turning away children.

The schools affected would be private schools that receive public funds. The Australian government recently [announced](#) a major increase in funding for Catholic and independent schools.

Some states already allow religious discrimination against LGBT+ pupils and teachers under exemptions to anti-discrimination laws. The government in Victoria recently tried to overturn the exemptions. LGBT+ rights campaigners have also lobbied for change in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

This week Australia's opposition Labor party [said](#) it would introduce amendments to discrimination laws which would prevent discrimination against LGBT+ staff. But some Labor senators have [said](#) this may be accompanied by changes to allow religious schools to preserve their "ethos" and prevent contradiction of church doctrines.

On Friday two senior leaders of the Catholic Church in Australia [said](#) schools should be allowed to discriminate against LGBT+ teachers. The archbishop of Sydney, Anthony Fisher, said "Catholic schools should be permitted to be Catholic". The archbishop of Brisbane, Mark Coleridge, supported his sentiment.

A National Secular Society spokesperson said the row was a "reminder that religious freedom is a

qualified right which protects everybody, not just those who loudly claim it for themselves".

"Religious freedom includes the right to reject the religion of others. It includes children's right to go to school regardless of what religious leaders may think of their personal characteristics.

"Religious freedom does not include a right to expel students or sack teachers for their sexual orientation or gender identity. Those who believe in genuine religious freedom must push back against those who bastardise the term in this way."

In May 2019 the NSS will host [Secularism 2019](#), a major one-day conference taking place under the tagline 'reclaiming religious freedom'.

Read more: [In some Australian schools, teachers can be fired for being gay](#) - The New York Times

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Secularism 2019: Reclaiming Religious Freedom

This conference will serve to highlight that true "religious freedom" means freedom of belief for people of all religions and none, and will also explore the limits of religious freedom when it impedes on other human rights, including bodily autonomy, equality and freedom of expression.

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