

'Freedom of Religion and Belief project': final report

Social Issues briefing #093, 29/04/2011.

Some may recall that I mysteriously disappeared at the end of 2008 to work on something called the 'Freedom of Religion and Belief project'. It's quite odd when people go off to work on something, only to hear nothing further. This briefing completes that story.

The following paragraphs have been kindly supplied by the Diocesan Secretary, Robert Wicks, and are a modified version of his report to the Standing Committee of the Diocese. (*If you want to cut to the chase, go straight to **paragraph 7.***)

1. On 17 September 2008 the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) launched the '[Freedom of religion and belief project](#)' (FRB). The FRB's terms of reference were to address the experiences and place in civil society of every religious and secular belief. However the initial impetus for the FRB was a concern about the treatment of Muslims within the broader Australian community, exemptions to anti-discrimination law and the value of religious anti-vilification law.
2. At its meeting on 22 September 2008, the Standing Committee endorsed the formation of an oversight committee comprising the Rev Dr Andrew Cameron, Mr Robert Wicks and Bishop Robert Forsyth (chair) to co-ordinate the initial response of the Diocese to the FRB. The Oversight Committee prepared a submission to FRB on behalf of the Standing Committee and co-ordinated the preparation of a 9 related submissions from various organisations and individuals within the Diocese. These were lodged with the FRB as separate but related submissions under cover of a letter from the Archbishop on 25 February 2009.
3. By the closing date for submissions on 28 February 2009, the FRB had received almost 2,000 submissions.
4. On 19 May 2009 the Oversight Committee hosted a Sydney stakeholders' meeting between the AHRC researchers, Professors Des Cahill and Gary Bouma, and a number of denominational/organisational representatives from the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, the Baptist Union of New South Wales, the Sydney Roman Catholic Diocese, Wesley Mission and the Australian Association of Christian Schools.
5. The initial expectation was that the final FRB report would be released in early 2010. However the report was ultimately launched in Canberra on 21 March 2011. Robert Wicks attended the launch, and also a pre-launch briefing at the offices of the Australian Christian Lobby given by Mr Graeme Innes, the Race Discrimination and Disability Commissioner who launched the report. Bishop Forsyth and Dr Cameron were unable to attend.
6. The initial concern was that the report would include recommendations which, if implemented, would detrimentally impact religious freedom in Australia.
7. In the end, the report did not include any recommendations. Instead it sought to capture the conversation around religion and belief in Australia. Despite the relatively high representation of non-Christian faiths during the consultation process, it is fair to say that the report itself clearly articulates the views of conservative Christianity. To that extent the outcome of the FRB is pleasing. Also pleasing is the interaction in the report with the submissions made on behalf of the Standing Committee and other agencies within the Diocese. The report is a useful snapshot of several discussions about religion in Australia, including its various interactions with the State. However, the project's initial ambitions, the volume of responses, and the length of time that has passed since it was launched, might reasonably have been expected to deliver more data. The relative brevity of the report and its eclectic method of summarizing various discussions is somewhat anticlimactic.

8. Mr Innes indicated in his pre-launch briefing that, in view the AHRC's current priority being human rights education, the AHRC did not have the capacity to pursue any of the matters raised in the report at this time. However the report would be made available to Government departments to take into account as they develop policy.
9. The approach taken by those responsible for preparing the report should be seen as a positive outcome for the Christian community. However there remains a need to be vigilant in the area of religious freedom. In particular there remains a considerable threat to freedom of religion across the western world, mainly arising from a new ideology about "equality". There is therefore a need to keep fine tuning the intellectual arguments to counter this ideology and to make sure that these arguments are heard in the public square.

- **Andrew Cameron (and Robert Wicks)**
(for the Social Issues Executive, Anglican Diocese of Sydney)

Sources and Further Reading

Freedom of religion and belief in 21st Century Australia, A research report prepared for the Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011, available for download at <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/frb/index.html>

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