

Submission by Victorian Religious Leaders

Focused review of how the change or suppression practices ban is working



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Secretary,
Victorian Sikh Gurduwaras Council



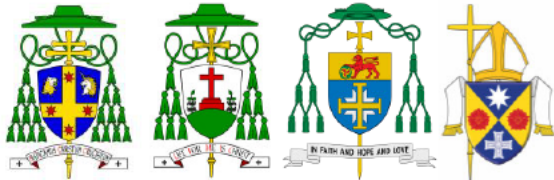
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Assistant Bishop,
Anglican Diocese of Melbourne



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President & Director,
Hindu Council of Australia (VIC)



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Eparch, Eparchy of Saints Peter and Paul
of Melbourne for Ukrainian Catholics in
Australia, New Zealand and Oceania



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Catholic Bishops of the Province of Victoria



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Interfaith and Community Liaison,
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Episcopal Vicar of Melbourne,
St Thomas the Apostle Chaldean Catholic
Diocese of Australia & New Zealand



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Public Officer/Secretary,
Board of Imams Victoria



Eparch, Syro-Malabar Eparchy
of St Thomas the Apostle, Melbourne



General Bishop of Melbourne,
Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Melbourne



Chairperson,
Sikh Interfaith Council of Victoria



Bishop, Maronite Diocese of St Maroun
Maronite Eparchy of Australia, New Zealand &
Oceania

Background

As religious leaders who minister to and care for more than 2 million Victorians in our communities, we welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the operation and effectiveness of the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act* in Victoria.

Through our places of worship, schools, aged care homes, hospitals and wide range of pastoral and social outreach services, our communities are deeply engaged in caring for others, with particular focus on those most in need. This commitment to serving, is not incidental and is a direct expression of the faiths we hold. It lies at the heart of the mission and identity of our communities.

We are strongly committed to supporting and accompanying members of our own communities and to promoting the common good across the wider Victorian community. It is in this spirit that we offer our response to this consultation.

Broader concerns with the current Act

From the outset, we affirm our opposition to harmful practices of coercion. However, as the Catholic Bishops of Victoria and Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) stated in an open letter to the then Premier in 2021, the *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act*, extends far beyond addressing these harmful practices.ⁱ

In their letter to the Premier, the Bishops and ICV shared concerns that the Bill (now Act) “criminalises conversation between children and parents, interferes with sound professional advice, and silences ministers of religion from providing personal attention for individuals freely seeking pastoral care for complex personal situations. It includes ill-conceived concepts of faith and conversation, vague definitions, and scientifically and medically flawed approaches. It places arbitrary limitations on parents, families and people of faith. ... the Bill appears to target people of faith in an unprecedented way, puts limits on ordinary conversations in families, and legislates for what prayer is legal and what prayer is not.”

It is our belief that in the five years intervening, the Act’s broad overreach, ambiguity and ill-defined concepts of faith, has caused confusion in the community. This is particularly evident, among people of faith – most particularly religious leaders and parents – who appear to be disproportionately affected by the Act in a manner not observed in other jurisdictions. These jurisdictions while legislating to ban conversion and suppression practices have done so with far narrower terms.

The disproportionate focus on people of faith and the ways this has been expressed – often lacking lived experience and nuance – is one of the reasons that we believe the Act needs to be amended. The Act would be significantly improved by following the example of other Australian jurisdictions, which provide clearer and more narrowly defined guidance on what does not constitute a conversion or suppress practice, for example – discussions between parents and children on matters relating to sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual activity or religion.

In addition to our ongoing concerns about the Act’s overreach, there is no evidence to justify its expansion, as demonstrated by the limited number of reported conversion or suppression practices since its commencement – just 14 to date.ⁱⁱ We are concerned that any expansion of the Act would only entrench the existing confusion within our communities and the broader Victorian community.

This consultation provides an opportunity to assess the Act’s effectiveness, including whether its original intent is being fulfilled and whether adjustments are required – particularly in light of legislation in other states and an expanding body of research examining the increasing incidence of gender incongruence among children, as well as the appropriateness of gender-affirmative treatment for minors.

We draw attention to the independent review commissioned by England's National Health Service (NHS) into the Tavistock Clinic, led by Dr Hillary Cass, a former President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.ⁱⁱⁱ The review found that, "young people's sense of identity is not always fixed and may evolve over time" and that "while some young people may feel an urgency to transition, young adults looking back at their younger selves would often advise slowing down".^{iv}

Furthermore, the Review speaks of "diversity of opinion as to how to best treat these children and young people" and that "clinicians have told us they are unable to determine with any certainty which children and young people will go on to have an enduring trans identity".^v

There is also a growing body of evidence pointing to a limited understanding of the long-term health and broader impacts of hormone interventions. As it stands, the Act may restrict the ability of young people facing gender incongruence or distress to access a full range of appropriate care – by only allowing one pathway, that of gender affirming care.

Consultation questions

Could the Act's operation and effectiveness be improved? If so, how?

We consider that the Act's operation and effectiveness could be improved by providing greater clarity on what constitutes a conversion or suppression practice – particularly in relation to parental care, pastoral care, expressions of faith (including teachings and prayer). While the consultation paper notes that the Act was not intended to capture all religious practices or teachings, or to prevent people seeking religious counsel, in practice, there remains ambiguity, leading to confusion about what is and is not covered by the Act.

Accordingly, we recommend that the Act include explicit exemptions for parental care and guidance, consensual counselling and pastoral care, religious teaching and non-coercive prayer, consistent with the approaches adopted in other jurisdictions, such as New South Wales and South Australia.

How clear is the Act's definition of what is and what is not a change or suppression practice? If further clarity is needed, what forms of clarification would be most helpful?

A considerable degree of ambiguity surrounds what constitutes a change or suppression practice, leading to confusion within our communities – particularly as it relates to the ordinary lived experiences of people of faith. The net effect has been a reluctance among religious leaders, parents and other care givers to engage in this area, for fear of falling foul of the law, now or in the future. As a result, individuals who are in need of care may miss out on valuable support from those closest to them, at a time when they are especially vulnerable.

Is greater clarity needed about how people of faith can hold and express their beliefs to support clear understanding and compliance with the Act? What forms of clarification would be most helpful?

Greater clarity is clearly needed. There has been a chilling effect, particularly on religious leaders, many of whom feel constrained or unable to provide appropriate pastoral care to those seeking guidance for fear of breaching the law. There are numerous instances in which leaders, parents or care-givers remain uncertain about how they can act due to ambiguities in the legislation. For example, would parents of a minor experiencing gender incongruence be considered to be engaging in a "suppression practice" by adopting a "wait and see" approach?

Conclusion

The *Change or Suppression (Conversion) Practices Prohibition Act* is overly broad, with ambiguous definitions that do not adequately reflect the everyday experiences and realities of ordinary Victorians,

including people of faith. Any review of the Act's effectiveness should consider whether its scope and parameters are fit for purpose or require reconsideration.

We urge the Victorian Law Reform Commission and State Government to revisit the Act's parameters and consistent with approaches taken in other jurisdictions, narrow its scope to ensure that parental guidance, pastoral care, counselling and religious teaching are not unduly and disproportionately restricted.

ⁱ Catholic Bishops of Victoria and the Islamic Council of Victoria (2021), *Open letter to the Premier*
<https://melbournecatholic.org/news/faith-leaders-write-to-premier-over-concerns-with-the-conversion-therapy-bill>

ⁱⁱ Victorian Law Reform Commission (2026), *Focused Review of How the Change or Suppression Practices Ban Is Working*,
https://media.lawreform.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/VLRC_Change_or_Suppression_Practices_Ban_Consultation_Paper_2026.pdf, p13

ⁱⁱⁱ Cass, H. (2024), *Independent review of gender identity services for children and young people: Final report*
<https://cass.independent-review.uk/home/publications/final-report/>

^{iv} Ibid p21

^v Ibid p22