

16 January, 2026

The Hon. Anthony Albanese MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

cc: The Hon. Tony Burke MP
Minister for Home Affairs

cc: The Hon. Michelle Rowland MP
Attorney-General of Australia

Dear Prime Minister, Minister, and Attorney-General,

SUBJECT: JOINT FAITH LEADERS LETTER ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND THE COMBATTING ANTISEMITISM HATE AND EXTREMISM BILL 2026

We write this open letter jointly as leaders of faith communities in Australia to reaffirm our shared commitment to opposing antisemitism, racial and religious hatred, and extremism in all their forms. We unequivocally condemn the recent terror attacks in Bondi. Such acts of violence are rejected by all faith communities and we extend our deepest sympathies to all the victims of this terrible crime.

As faith leaders, we write out of a shared responsibility for the long-term vitality of Australia's democratic, multi-faith, and multicultural society. Our intention is not to deny the reality of racial and religious hate or the need to address it, but to raise principled concerns about protecting the fundamental freedoms that underpin trust, cohesion, and peaceful coexistence for all Australians.

We wish to express serious concern regarding the Combatting Antisemitism Hate and Extremism Bill 2026, both because of its (perhaps unintended) adverse implications for religious freedom and freedom of expression and the inadequate consultation and review.

Faith communities, legal experts, and civil society organisations have not been afforded a reasonable amount of time to properly study the legislation, assess its legal and constitutional implications, or prepare constructive and well-considered submissions for what has been described as the 'most consequential change' to Australia's counterterrorism laws since 9/11.

Legislation of this breadth and sensitivity requires careful deliberation and meaningful consultation. A rushed legislative process of this nature undermines confidence, increases the risk of unintended consequences, and does not assist community unity or social cohesion.

As leaders across the range of faith communities in Australia, we have deep concerns about the Bill's impact on religious freedom and freedom of expression.

These freedoms are not peripheral considerations. They are foundational to Australia's constitutional framework, democratic culture, and the ability of faith communities to contribute

positively and responsibly to public life. Religious freedom includes the right of individuals and communities to teach, preach, and express their beliefs openly and publicly, including through sermons, religious education, pastoral guidance, and moral commentary, even where those beliefs may be contested, unpopular, or misunderstood. Provided such expression does not incite physical harm or violence, it must be protected as a legitimate exercise of religious practice.

While we recognise the seriousness of antisemitism and all forms of hatred, and the responsibility of government to respond decisively to genuine threats, our concern lies with whether the measures proposed are proportionate, balanced, and consistent with equality before the law. Laws designed to combat hatred and extremism must be carefully limited to their proper purpose and not create unintended consequences and damage the social fabric.

We do not believe that the proposed new criminal offence of ‘Serious Racial Vilification’ (section 80.2BF) is appropriate and agree with the position of the NSW Law Reform Commission that such an offence ‘would introduce imprecision and subjectivity into the criminal law’ and that ‘this ambiguity makes hatred an inappropriate standard for the criminal law.’¹ The Bill does not provide clear and adequate protection for lawful religious teaching, sermons, theological instruction, pastoral guidance, and good-faith religious expression.

Furthermore, we are alarmed by the prospect that the government might, in order to win the support of minority parties in the parliament, make section 80.2BF even worse by removing the ‘religious texts’ exemptions and extending the scope to include other protected attributes. At a time when we should be coming together as a nation, this would be the worst possible outcome for social cohesion.

It would be inconsistent with the Prime Minister’s pre-election promise to faith leaders that ‘legal protections for people of faith will not go backwards under Labor’ as well as his commitment to progress religious protections in a bipartisan manner with the Coalition.

Faith leaders have previously signalled their support for the Serious Religious Vilification provisions in the government’s proposed Religious Discrimination Bill 2024. We urge the government to remove section 80.2BF from the Combatting Antisemitism Hate and Extremism Bill 2026 and to address the issue of serious religious vilification based on this model.

We are also concerned by the risks created by the different thresholds of criminality in the Bill, often based on different and conflicting uses of terms like hate and hatred. ‘Hate’ is an imprecise term with a range of meanings in different contexts and its presence is perceived differently by different people. It may be useful as a shorthand in public debate but not as a term on which criminal liability depends. As a general policy, expression may be appropriately criminalised where it is used to incite or threaten physical violence against a person or a group, but it is dangerous to criminalise expression just because a person or group feels intimidated, harassed hated or threatened.

¹ https://lawreform.nsw.gov.au/documents/Publications/Reports/Report_151_Serious_racial_and_religious_vilification.pdf

An overbroad definition of ‘hate crimes’ is used to determine whether a group can be listed as a prohibited hate group. ‘Hate crimes’ as defined need not be crimes at all – which is a seriously misleading use of language. Compounding this, the provisions allow past lawful speech or expression to be deemed as hate crimes, which may expose individuals or institutions to consequences based on past lawful speech or expression. Religious sermons, lectures, educational resources, and interfaith materials are often publicly recorded and shared. In the absence of clear protection against retrospective or quasi-retrospective consequences, faith leaders and institutions are left unable to confidently order their conduct according to the law.

We are ready to work with the Government to improve the Bill to remove unintended consequences and overreach while achieving the aims of combatting antisemitism and racial and religious hatred. But we need more time. We therefore respectfully urge the Government to delay the introduction of the Bill to allow for an adequate consultation period, and to engage directly and meaningfully with faith communities to get the right balance in this legislation.

Australia’s strength lies in its ability to protect both public safety and fundamental freedoms. Measures intended to combat hate should reinforce trust, fairness, and inclusion, not weaken them. Faith communities have long played a positive role in education, social services, humanitarian response, and interfaith understanding. Preserving the space for lawful religious expression is essential to maintaining that contribution.

We offer these views in a constructive spirit and stand ready to engage further with all parties to develop appropriate amendments to ensure an appropriate legislative response to hatred and extremism.

Yours sincerely



The Rt Rev Dr Michael Stead
Bishop of South Sydney
Anglican Diocese of Sydney

On behalf of:

Imam Shadi Alsuleiman
President
Australian National Imams
Council



Most Rev'd Kanishka Raffel
Archbishop
Anglican Diocese of Sydney



Most Rev Anthony Fisher OP
Archbishop of Sydney
Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney



Archbishop Makarios
Primate of the Greek Orthodox
Church of Australia



Archbishop Antoine-Charbel
Tarabay
Maronite Archdiocese of
Australia, New Zealand and
Oceania



Mark Edwards
Religious Freedom Representative
Australian Christian Churches



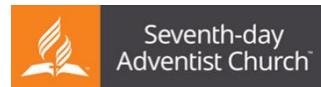
Rev David Burke
President
Presbyterian Church of Australia



Rev Mark Wilson
National Ministries Director
Australian Baptist Churches



Dr Brendan Pratt
President
Seventh-day Adventist Church
in Australia



Australia

His Grace, Bishop Daniel
Coptic Orthodox Church,
Diocese of Sydney & Affiliated
Regions



Gawaine Powell Davies
Buddhist Council of NSW



Buddhist Council of NSW
Connecting the Buddhist Community

Dr Ali Al Samail
CEO
Australian Ahl Al Bait Islamic Centre



Bishop Robert Rabbat
Melkite Eparchy of Australia and
New Zealand



Dr Karanjeet Sandhu
Australian Sikh Association



Archbishop Amel Nona
Chaldean Catholic Diocese in
Australia
and New Zealand



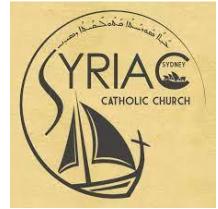
Abdullah Khan
President
Islamic Schools Association of Australia



Metropolitan Basilos Kodseie
Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia and New Zealand



Bishop Georges Casmoussa
Apostolic Visitor
Syriac Catholic Community in Australia



Most Rev. Mor Malatius Malki Malki
Metropolitan Archbishop of the Syrian Orthodox Church



Rev David King
Moderator
Presbyterian Church of NSW



Rev Dr Steve Bartlett
Director of Ministries
NSW & ACT Baptist Churches



Baptist Churches of NSW & ACT

Rev. Fr. Andrawes Faraj
St Mark's Coptic Catholic Church



Mike Sounthor
Executive Director
Freedom for Faith



Ross Clifford
Executive Director
NSW Council of Churches



Rev Ken Graham
President
Christian Missionary Alliance



Mark Sneddon
Executive Director
Institute for Civil Society



Sei Kato
Director of Public Affairs
Church of Scientology Australia

