

## LABOR EQUIVOCATES ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Australian Labor Party must give a firm commitment that the legal right of religious schools to operate in a way consistent with their beliefs will not be watered down.

Education Minister Simon Crean has fallen short of giving the sought-after commitment in correspondence with Christian Schools Australia.

The issue arises because the Standing Committee of Attorneys General (the intergovernmental committee of state and commonwealth AGs) is to investigate "harmonisation" of state and federal law in the area.

"Recent anti-discrimination law changes in Victoria and South Australia, led by state Labor Governments, have eroded the existing protections for Christian and other religious schools to choose staff on the basis of genuine faith," said Stephen O'Doherty, CEO of Christian Schools Australia.

"There is a clear agenda abroad to take away our right to choose staff, by removing exemptions from state anti-discrimination acts. Thankfully state parliaments have so far stopped short of outright removal, although they have narrowed the protection significantly in SA and Vic.

CSA asked both the ALP and Coalition

*Will you give an unequivocal commitment not to support amendments that would remove the current ability of religious schools to*

- 1. hire and retain staff on the basis that they are genuine adherents, in belief and practice, to the Christian or other faith basis of the school; and*
- 2. integrate a world view based on religious beliefs and values into curriculum and school practice including enrolment.*

While the Coalition gave the sought after assurance, the Labor response, from Education Minister Simon Crean, has only served to heighten concern.

*If re-elected, a Gillard Labor Government will harmonise and consolidate anti-discrimination laws. This will include looking at gaps at the federal level and reviewing the powers of the Australian Human Rights Commission and the adequacy of the complaint-handling process. Federal Labor recognises that there are longstanding exemptions in anti-discrimination laws, at both the federal and state level, for educational institutions established for religious purposes in relation to the employment of staff. This project would be undertaken in consultation with stakeholders, including independent schools, on the proposed single anti-discrimination laws. (Simon Crean MP, email to CSA 18/08/10. Also contained in a letter from the ALP campaign HQ ).*

"Labor's 'recognition' of the long-standing exemptions is meaningless without a commitment to uphold and protect them in the upcoming 'harmonisation' process.

"Attacking this freedom is part of the Greens election platform. The Coalition has given the assurance we sought. The lack of a similar commitment from the ALP, given the likely state of the Senate, is a serious concern to Christian schools across the nation," Mr O'Doherty said.

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More background to this issue at <http://bit.ly/cOqjhZ>