

## **Religious freedom does not, and should never, justify abusing LGBTIQ+ children.** **12 July 2020**

Rainbow Labor ACT wishes to respond to claims made in a joint statement by Christian Schools Australia, Adventist Schools Australia, the Australian Association of Christian Schools and the Islamic School of Canberra (collectively, the “Associations”) in opposition to the Barr Labor Government’s proposed ban on conversion therapy, as reported in a recent article in the *RiotACT!*<sup>1</sup>

Rainbow Labor ACT does not believe that the definition of *conversion therapy* being responded to by the Associations, repeated below, would unreasonably restrict religious or spiritual belief and practices, or create undesirable liability for religious groups that hold disaffirming beliefs about LGBTIQ+ people, if it were enacted as the legal definition.

*“[conversion therapy] is any practice or treatment by any person that seeks to change, suppress and/or eliminate a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expressions.”<sup>2</sup>*

In saying this, we note that the final definition is still being worked out by the Government and a small number of stakeholder groups including the Association of Independent Schools which includes a number of faith-based schools. We acknowledge that it is possible that public consultation on the forthcoming Bill may have been less broad or representative than may otherwise have been the case due to the ongoing pandemic.

The definition above does not, as the Associations’ statement attempts to claim, include religious practices, such as prayer, or general counselling on religious doctrine. The definition clearly constructs conversion therapy *as an act done to a person by another person* in an attempt to alter their non-heteronormative characteristics. Prayer and counselling do not do this. We believe that the Human Rights Commission and the legal system would be able to make this vital distinction if a matter came before them under the proposed laws.

The term *conversion therapy*, as generally understood, describes attempts to alter a person’s LGBTIQ+ identity through deliberate and systematic attempts to instil enduring feelings of shame towards one’s self for being LGBTIQ+ or to associate one’s LGBTIQ+ identity with physical pain or emotional trauma.<sup>3</sup> We believe that the tentative definition, through the phrase “any practice or treatment”, accurately reflects this understanding.

The International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims describes conversion therapy as “torture taking place at a global scale”.<sup>4</sup> Rainbow Labor ACT is disappointed that the representative associations of a number of schools, who Canberrans trust with the safety and wellbeing of their children, would go on the record to oppose protections from abuse and torture for some of the most vulnerable members of our community on such frivolous grounds.

Rainbow Labor ACT wholeheartedly supports the ban on conversion therapy.

### **Joey Mann**

Acting Convenor, Rainbow Labor ACT

*Rainbow Labor ACT is an association of LGBTIQ+ Labor Party members devoted to promoting equality and diversity within the ALP, advancing the rights of LGBTIQ+ people and building networks with the broader LGBTIQ+ community in the ACT. We are not affiliated with, or a branch of, the ACT Labor Party.*

---

<sup>1</sup> James Coleman, *Religious schools push for rethink of ACT’s ‘gay conversion therapy’ ban*, 11 July 2020, *RiotACT!*. <https://the-riotact.com/religious-schools-push-for-rethink-of-acts-gay-conversion-therapy-ban/386704>; *Prohibition Of Conversion Practices In ACT*, Australian Association of Christian Schools. <https://www.aacs.net.au/index.php?id=20>.

<sup>2</sup> *Fact Sheet: Prohibition of Conversion Therapy Practices in the ACT*, ACT Government. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZzRQCjaK8Olo9K1OKS4Uo5jBu0mNiDlo/view>

<sup>3</sup> *About Conversion Therapy*, The Trevor Project. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-involved/trevor-advocacy/50-bills-50-states/about-conversion-therapy/>

<sup>4</sup> *Conversion Therapy is Torture*, 23 April 2020, International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims. <https://irct.org/media-and-resources/latest-news/article/1027>