



Media Release

26th March 2014

Council Condemns Emasculation of Racial Discrimination Act

ECCWA President, Dr. Zarrin S Siddiqui today condemned the Abbot government's proposed changes to the Racial Discrimination Act. "Balance, is a hall mark of plural democratic societies such as Australia and Section 18C (which became law in 1995 in response to recommendations from major inquiries, including the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody) and section 18D of the Racial Discrimination Act is testimony to it", she added.

"The former provides protection from racial abuse/hatred by making it unlawful to commit an act that is reasonably likely to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate someone because of their race whilst the latter protects free speech, in that it allows comments or actions made in good faith and 'fair comment' if it is an 'expression of a genuine belief' held by the person making the comment", said Dr. Siddiqui.

"Unfettered freedom of speech is merely a myth, for civil societies have laws against defamation, making false or misleading claims from a business/trading perspective, professional bodies have codes of conduct and Australian parliaments have standing orders which protects members being abuse defamed by their colleagues". It is therefore preposterous to suggest that somehow section 18C of the Act limits free speech in a way that aforementioned don't", she added.

"What has been a milestone in Australian democracy and worked well for 19 years under both ALP and Coalition governments (including the long tenure of John Howard) is now under threat as the amendments proposed on Wednesday by the Attorney General which will considerably weaken the protections provided by section 18c of the current Act", The government's proposal to incorporate provisions to deal with racial vilification are merely to deflect criticisms against its actions for several states including WA already have tough provisions in their Criminal code to deal with it" argued Dr. Siddiqui.

"It is indeed ironic that within a week of the international community observing 21 March as Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and recommitting to eliminating all forms of racial discrimination, the Abbot government is seeking to amend the Racial Discrimination Act which will be counterproductive in this regard."

"In a plural democratic society which values multiculturalism as a public policy, political leaders should ensure that they protect minorities from being abused, insulted, harassed, intimidated etc. on racial grounds and the current Racial Discrimination Act does precisely that without curtailing informed public debate on race related matters. Accordingly, politicians have an obligation to do all they can to ensure the voices of ethnic, indigenous and other minorities are heard not lost. It is therefore vital that in the upcoming senate elections in WA, voters select candidates who send a clear signal to the Abbott government that they oppose its moves to weaken the Act" said Dr. Siddiqui. She has also urged ECCWA member organisations to raise their concerns and participate in public consultations to effectively oppose the proposed change.