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Changes to Racial Discrimination Act a safety threat

The proposed changes to the Racial Discrimination Act pose a threat to the safety and wellbeing to some of the most vulnerable members of the Australian community and give the wrong message to the bigots in our society that it is OK to act on their bigotry, says Professor Karen Healy, President of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW)

The AASW is deeply concerned by the changes to the act proposed by Senator George Brandis, particularly the proposed definition of “intimidation”, which may refer only to acts that cause a “fear of physical harm”. This definition is out-of-step with the commonly understood and broader meaning “to induce fear”. The concept of “vilification” is not sufficient to capture the range of acts, behaviours and expressions that may be considered discriminatory. The use of “vilification” alone to capture discriminatory acts precludes exchanges between people. Finally, the exemption of “words and images in public discussion” is too broad and has the capacity to undermine current protections.

The AASW welcomes the publication of an Exposure Draft, which will allow time for the Australian community to provide feedback on an Act that has potentially far-reaching consequences for human rights and dignity in this country.

The AASW values free speech and the expression of a range of views that reflects the rich diversity that is Australia. We also believe in an individual’s right to human dignity and to feel safe in their community. Any measure aimed at improving free speech should not be at the expense of the safety and wellbeing of members of our community. This is not a compromise the Australian people should accept and one which the AASW will strongly oppose.

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