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GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE A MET IN COMMITTEE ROOM 1 PARLIAMENT HOUSE ON 28 MARCH 2025

INQUIRY INTO DISCRIMINATION AND BULLYING IN TASMANIAN SCHOOLS

The committee met at 9.32 a.m.

Mr WILLIE - Welcome to today's hearing of the Government Administration Committee A's Inquiry into Discrimination and Bullying in Tasmanian Schools. Please state your name and the capacity in which you're appearing before the committee. I'll start with you, Julian.

Mr PUNCH - Julian Punch, I'm representing Rainbow Communities Tasmania Incorporated.

Mr SHAW - Patrick Shaw, I'm the Public Officer of Rainbow Communities.

Mr DORAN - Brian Doran, Secretary/Treasurer of Rainbow Communities Tasmania.

Mr WILLIE - Can I confirm that you've received and read the guide sent to you by the committee secretary?

WITNESSES - Yes.

Mr WILLIE - This hearing is covered by parliamentary privilege, allowing individuals to speak with freedom without fear of being sued or questioned in any court or place out of parliament. This protection is not accorded to you if statements that may be defamatory are repeated or referred to by you outside the parliamentary proceedings. This hearing is public. The public and media may be present. Should you wish aspects of your evidence to be heard in private, you must make this request to the committee at the time. I ask you each to take the statutory declaration, which is in front of you there.

Mr JULIAN STANLEY PUNCH, PRESIDENT, **Mr PATRICK BERNARD SHAW**, PUBLIC OFFICER, AND **Mr BRIAN JOSEPH DORAN**, SECRETARY/TREASURER, RAINBOW COMMUNITIES TASMANIA, MADE THE STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

Mr WILLIE - Thank you. I'll now hand over to our Chair, Anita Dow.

CHAIR (Ms Dow) - Thank you, Josh, and thank you to each of you for presenting to our committee today. We've heard from a diverse number of groups and individuals from across the community. We welcome your input to the work of our committee today.

As Josh said, I'm Anita Dow, the Chair of this committee. I'm based up here in Braddon, in Burnie, joining you by video conference today. We have Kristie Johnston, who's a member for Clark; Josh Willie who's a member for Clark; and Vica Bayley, who's a member for Clark. Mark Shelton, who's a member for Lyons, is an apology; he's unable to be with us today. We have a new addition to our committee in Michael Ferguson, a member for Bass who's also online. Miriam Beswick's joining you from Braddon alongside me this morning as well, as an independent member for Braddon.

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Julian, thank you very much for your submission to the committee. We've all had the opportunity to read through it and it's quite thorough. The question that I wanted to lead off with was that in your opening remarks in your submission you talk about offering some proactive solutions to this committee about how we provide our recommendations back to the parliament about how we address bullying and discrimination in Tasmanian schools, in particular around homophobia and other forms of discrimination. I wondered if you might outline for the committee a couple of those proactive solutions that you see, please.

Mr PUNCH - Thank you very much. Yes, our major concern is included in our submission, and that is that bullying and discrimination is not necessarily young people bullying one another, but it is institutions that establish a bullying and discriminatory community. That's where we see the solutions happening in terms of the capacity, particularly in relation to the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, in terms of their submission - which I've read that they've given to you - that our community is immoral, unnatural and decadent. This was the major thing with 'Don't Mess with Marriage', which was thankfully rejected by the general public.

I today want to particularly remember my nephew, Joel Punch. He went to school in Sydney, son of my brother, and he suicided at the age of 30. I was particularly involved. I was a priest at the time and I immediately went up to Sydney to help my brother and sister-in-law deal with it, and their family. It's still there today. It's a huge black hole in the life of our family. He went to a Catholic school and he was subject to, at the time, a very conservative Catholic Archbishop who was teaching the same stuff as the current Archbishop here, Julian Porteous; that we are immoral, unnatural and decadent.

I went into the priesthood as a way of trying to make some meaning out of my life, recognising that I was gay. I went through eight years of training and I then had 10 years working in it. I just found myself totally hypocritical in what I was having to say in terms of the church's attitude to gay people.

We're 10 per cent of the population. I'm now working in 76 countries that execute, imprison and persecute the LGBTQIA+ community. I'm going into those countries and working with them and taking them through what is the asylum path. They have to leave their family, they have to leave their country and they have to then travel on the asylum road to reach safety. We've now established they're a silent majority of people. They can't talk about it, particularly in Islamic countries. I appreciate the Islamic culture, but this is the one area - and it's assisted by the British colonial system in a lot of those countries - that, again, the persecution of gay people.

So, solutions: you're a very powerful committee and you have the capacity to find some solutions and make some resolutions. We would really encourage you to try to do that. This is a very powerful committee. The first thing that I would suggest is that the last time I was here was as part of a group that was opposing that under the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1998* that there is an exemption for the Catholic Church to sack gay teachers. That's an appalling blight on us and it's an awful blight on any gay person in a Catholic school, where they can seek some acceptance of who they are and some approach in terms of education to understanding that they've got a happy life ahead of them, rather than being regarded as immoral, unnatural and decadent.

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That was passed by this House - not by the Upper House. I sat there that day and listened to the most atrocious discussion in the Legislative Council that was supporting it, and it got through. That is an appalling situation. It makes us no better than what happens in those 76 countries. We have to go through the same path that those people are going through.

CHAIR - One of the things that you mentioned in your submission is cultural awareness training. It sounds as though that's some of the work that you're involved in in other countries across the globe. I wondered whether you might provide some insight into that work for this committee and how you think that might apply in Tasmania. I thank you very much for sharing your personal story as well about your nephew. That couldn't have been easy to do in this forum and we appreciate that.

Mr PUNCH - The first thing I would say, a lot of it is about conversion therapy. What I'm finding that I'm having to do is to take people through - when I first went to Bangladesh at the invite of a gay person we had to go down to a place called Cox's Bazar, which was safer, and stay in the hotel there. The first thing that was said to me was Allah is angry with me. I said, 'Allah is not angry with you, I talked to Allah.' I found myself as a Catholic priest for the first time using the terminology 'Allah' and this person loved his religion and still does. After eight years, he's now come to the stage where he can accept the fact that as a gay person, he's not bad or evil. He's still practising his Islamic religion. It's part of that process that you have to take people through, which is very personal in terms of the cultural awareness. It's showing them that you're a gay person and you're proud about being a gay person, and that they are not, as is said in the Christian situation, immoral, unnatural and decadent. That takes a lot of time and it's a very personal path that needs to be trodden.

That's the importance of education too. That's where the cultural awareness needs to be very practical. There needs to be people who they can relate to and learn about being gay, and learning to accept that there are many people - that's where leaders are really important. It's a path that's not led by charismatic leaders. It's a path where you have to learn to walk that path with your own strength. It's an environmental thing.

I'd say that the first thing is that - and you've got the capacity to do this - that exemption under the Act should be reversed. I've been in the Anti-Discrimination Commission now many times. Brian and I had seven years of a guy, every time we walked our dogs down the road, he would come out and if he had a chance he'd bash us, drive his car against us. It's that environment that is allowing it to be taught in schools. This person was a strong Catholic. Allowing that environment - we've got to change that environment. It changes here. That exemption got through and he's using it today, I mean, I've read what he said to this committee. It's appalling. It's helping people to walk that path.

CHAIR - I might open it up to questions from the committee because I'm conscious of time; we've only allocated to 10.15 a.m. It might give you the opportunity to hear from other members of the committee and then you could provide some further answers to that. I'll just ask Josh if he has any questions.

Mr WILLIE - We've heard throughout this inquiry that there are schools in different systems, whether it's Catholic, independent or state schools around the state that are doing a good job of inclusion. Are there any schools that you've heard of? You don't have to name the schools, but what sorts of attributes do those schools have where they are promoting a positive, inclusive environment?

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Mr PUNCH - I'd just like to submit this Tasmanian Briefing Paper from Latrobe University. It details the mental health difficulties of the LGBTQIA+ community. I'd just like to table it because it says that lifetime suicidal ideation was prevalent for 79 per cent of the LGBTQIA+ community. There are particular comparisons between Tasmania and other states which illustrate that the Tasmanian gay community is worse off nationally. It's a challenge to you and it's a challenge to us in what we do.

Your question is really relevant because I think that there's a huge change now. Previously, if you declared yourself to your family as gay, you were often kicked out of the family. The two people who took a stand right at the start to change the legislation - their families kicked them out of the family because they took a stand on it. But now that's changed.

I think the Catholic schools are doing a huge amount because they've got to deal with an Archbishop who's so homophobic. They're exemplary. I think most of the Catholic schools are exemplary. The head of Catholic Education is not. He was introduced into the state by [Archbishop] Porteous. They've also got to deal with a head of Catholic Education who's appalling.

I think the big day up on the hill with St Virgil's College to me was an example. [Archbishop] Porteous went into that school - [with] 'Don't Mess with Marriage' - and he started lecturing the people in the school that they were immoral, unnatural, and decadent, the gay people. Parents stood up and took their children out of the situation. They walked out to the front of St Virgil's College and they drew a rainbow in the front of that gate, knowing that [Archbishop] Porteous had to exit through that way. When he went out he had to walk through the rainbow and they booed him. That to me was an extraordinary situation where Catholic schools are dealing with it very well and supporting their community.

I think there's a growing understanding that it's an unhealthy situation that affects the whole community because to select one section of the community and make them victims is a Nazi situation. People generally won't stand for it; hence the gay marriage referendum was successfully thrown out. It is trying to change that culture. I think the majority of the community here are with that. Still, you have, in this House, a restriction for the Anti-Discrimination Commission, in that there's an exemption where gay teachers are expelled from the community.

Mr WILLIE - On that, there are human rights advocates who would say Tasmania has some of the best anti-discrimination laws in the country.

Mr PUNCH - I know, but we don't. If I'd had time, I would have read you the results of Latrobe University. It doesn't. That is an absolute scourge that the Legislative Council has approved an exemption under the Act. We don't. If you read that at your leisure, you'll find that Tasmanian young people are subject to suicidal ideation at an extraordinarily high rate - 78 per cent have been through it, all the mental health difficulties that they're going through.

I know Rodney [Croome] is saying that, but it's a self-determined path that we need to pass through, and we all have to do it - in coming out - each and every one of us, you have to go through that self-determined path. It's not a charismatic leader who says that we've passed laws and - we're not. The reality is that bad mental health is a huge determinant in our community and we're still silent.

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Mr WILLIE - Back to my original question about the positive attributes, you just gave an example of a school where there is a positive culture. What leads to that? Is it the school leadership? Is it education programs, is it support staff who can support students and families? Or is it a combination of all of that?

Mr PUNCH - It's community development. It's at every aspect of community development. It's importing, encouraging us to celebrate, giving us opportunities to celebrate being gay. I mean, there should be - I was significantly part of the movement in Tasmania with Timor-Leste and their freedom. We had many years of protests to get to that stage where Timor-Leste was free from their occupation. Today, the president of Timor-Leste leads the gay pride march every year. That's an example, and there are many more examples of that where leaders are able to encourage - particularly political leaders. It's really important that we oppose that. He has to be stopped. [Archbishop] Porteous has to be stopped. He introduced a very conservative head of Catholic schools into the state and the stuff that he said in this Commission

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CHAIR - I might draw you back to the question from Josh. I'm just conscious that other people will have questions as well. You've put those points very clearly about the Archdiocese, in other comments that you've made to the committee. Josh, is there anything else that you wanted to ask?

Mr WILLIE - No, I'm happy to hand over - aware of the time that we have.

CHAIR - We haven't got much time left. Kristie, I'll hand over to you if you have a question.

Ms JOHNSTON - Thank you for your submission. You touched in your opening remarks on the importance of school in setting culture, not only within the school, but in the broader impact of discrimination within a school, and then it flows out into the community. You've given some examples in relation to Josh's question where students and parents have actively engaged in positive inclusion practices as a way of demonstrating their values in Catholic schools. Has it been your observation in more recent years - I'm talking over maybe the last two or three years - that it's really been reliant on students, families, and some teachers to model those inclusive practices, or to lead those inclusive practices in Catholic schools rather than leadership within Catholic schools? Has it been your experience that it's been a grassroots thing that has led to inclusion rather than top-down?

Mr PUNCH - It's not top-down. It's a broad base where the community is able to celebrate diversity. I managed a program in the Department of Health some years ago on managing diversity. It's a state government movement in all the departments where they have to report every year on what they've done in terms of managing diversity. We're only one of the groups in managing diversity. It's been enormous and that's a great example of how the head of public servants has contributed to changing society. Managing diversity is very positive. It has objectives that you try to reach each year. You have to report on those each year, and you have to measure them every year. I spent three years in the Department of Health managing that and developing that program and it's enormously successful. It's still there. It is a very positive move.

Ms JOHNSTON - You tabled a paper from Latrobe University, I think it was, about the mental health impact on discrimination within Tasmanian schools, not talking specifically

about Catholic, independent, or government schools. Are you aware of examples where young people have been discriminated against in schools and the mental health impact that might occur, not only whilst they're in school but then post-school as well? Do you have examples of where that might have occurred, and can you speak a bit more about the long-term impact of discrimination on people's mental health?

Mr PUNCH - Yes. There are lots. Our organisation is constantly - we have a website, which is quite important I think, and we're constantly getting requests from parents and young people to come and talk about it and share what's happened to them. My nephew's an example.

Ms JOHNSTON - Yes, thank you for sharing.

Mr PUNCH - The suicide rates in Tasmania are higher than elsewhere. Suicide ideation is very prevalent and it needs to be tackled. It's complicated. It's not easy. I know with my nephew, he made several attempts before he was successful. It takes a culture. There's the old saying about it, 'It takes a community to educate', but it also takes a community to - and it's in that community development area where you have to strengthen it.

We're constantly getting people wanting to talk to us. With my nephew, the first thing we did was, when I went up there, I said, 'Look, we need to get the community in.' We put a barbecue on for my nephew's friends. The funeral was just enormous. They were all talking about exactly what statistics are showing, how they'd experienced ideation, how they had to fight ideation with their friends or partners. It needs to be part of the community, part of education.

I think that example of the public service managing diversity is a very practical way. I'm still meeting - I met people last night at the conservancy, a lot of people who've been through that health - but all of the departments are subject to it. It's a good example of how the government can encourage managing diversity.

Mr SHAW - Just on that, to back Julian up, if you don't measure it, you don't manage it. I'd urge the committee, if there are any ways to measure things and recommendations you can make for measuring and seeing what's going on, that would be very useful.

CHAIR - Thanks, Kristie. I'll hand over to Vica. Do you have any questions, Vica?

Mr BAYLEY - Yes. Thanks, Chair. Thanks all for your submission and coming in and sharing your story and your nephew's story.

In the opening part of your submission you talk about the fundamental causes of homophobia, which are structured and funded in many of our organisations. We've talked at length about the Archdiocese and Catholic Education, so I don't propose to go there. You mentioned the Anglican system.

I'm just really interested in that it's structured and funded in many of our organisations. Are there other sectors or organisations that you're particularly aware of that have structural discrimination and homophobia and funding action in that space that you should bring to the committee's attention, so that we can raise it and look into it?

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Mr PUNCH - The Catholic community situation is interesting. The Catholic Women's League is a very conservative organisation. There are a lot of organisations that move into the community from - the Catholic school system here is a real problem because what's happened is that the federal government's allowed the Catholic school system to centralise their funding so it all goes out to the Catholic centre, which is a huge - the old nursing home - and the Archbishop takes a percentage of the education budget, the welfare budget, the migration budget, all those budgets. He takes a percentage out of it, so he's able to move that at his direction.

Another example we have is the Catholic priesthood; there are only about one or two white priests. What they're doing, they're bringing priests in from Nigeria or basic Catholic countries and they also draw their migration from those Catholic countries. What happens is that the priests come out on the 457 visa, they're not allowed to apply for citizenship. They're subject to - we're working with a few of them to take a stand against that. The Archbishop system, if you don't teach immoral, unnatural and decadent - and a high percentage of priests are gay - and then you go back.

Mr BAYLEY - Outside of the Catholic system, because we've heard a lot of evidence. We've had the Archbishop in here, and I guess we're well aware of some of the challenges there. You mentioned the Anglican system. Is Rainbow Communities Tasmania aware of other case studies or complaints coming to you about specific issues in the state system or in other institutions, or, in your words, organisations that are funded and have structural discrimination against certain communities?

Mr PUNCH - Religion is the major one. It's only really the Uniting Church. There's a struggle in the Uniting Church at the moment. That's powerful. It's every Sunday, although people are falling away from it, and I think that's positive.

Mr DORAN - Just personally, I think teachers in state schools are a lot better with LGBTQIA+ issues, for students, parents - it's easier to manage. That's the way it should be.

Mr BAYLEY - You'd say the state system in that space is pretty positive and pretty proactive and doing a good job?

Mr DORAN - That's just my personal feedback.

Mr PUNCH - I think the Catholic school system and the Catholics are too. They're finding ways of dealing with it that are creative, imaginative, but supportive.

Mr BAYLEY - The Anglican system, you mentioned that specifically in your opening statement - we haven't heard a lot about or from them or their cohort.

Mr PUNCH - The leader is very difficult. The Anglican Archbishop is difficult, but it's not as proactive as the Catholic.

Mr BAYLEY - In its discrimination?

Mr PUNCH - [George] Pell had an enormous control and it's just been broken by the Pope, in the sense that the Cardinal who replaced him is Greek Orthodox. It's changing at the top substantially. The church is totally schismatic and that's what I'm saying, one of the things

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that you could do is make sure that the apostolic delegate, the papal nuncio, gets a copy of your report, if you're revealing stuff that needs to be - the pathway to the Pope, he's changing things rapidly and he's changing the leadership. He's breaking that leadership. If you can interact with the papal nuncio - you're the elected leaders - that's a way of showing that there is dissent. We're going to get a new Archbishop. The papal nuncio has a responsibility to listen to you people. You're the leaders and that would be a positive thing to do, make sure he gets it, and pointedly.

Mr BAYLEY - Thanks. That's an interesting suggestion. We can take that on board and discuss.

Mr DORAN - Just quickly -

CHAIR - I wanted to offer the other members of the committee the opportunity to ask a question and I might just come back at the end to provide any further comments. Michael, did you have anything that you wanted to ask?

Mr FERGUSON - Yes, Chair and good morning. Thank you to our guests for appearing today. Thank you for your submission. I am mindful of time, but I want to invite you to have another response to Mr Willie's question because even though we respectfully listen to your points of view, there's some evidence there of a personality or theology conflict. We understand that, but I want to draw you back to that question that Mr Willie asked; what are the good examples or the good practice, best practice, examples of positive school environments? We've heard you on many of those other elements and perspectives that you brought to us. In our time remaining, what are the good things we can all agree on that have worked well and allow people to flourish in their schools regardless of their family, personal or church background?

Mr PUNCH - It's not a personality difference; it's a fundamental difference that's the problem. The power of the church is invested in one person and that's the difficulties. But to the question; encouraging parents, giving them a forum, possible funding to them, particularly in the public school system, developing a pathway there for LGBTQIA+ people as a safer environment, all those elements of the community. We've just focused on the Catholic school because it is the major problem for us.

We spent time recently with the ex-army federal member -

Mr DORAN - Jacqui?

Mr PUNCH - Jacqui Lambie, and that opened up a whole new area for us in terms of the army and her involvement. The army's been a very difficult area too for people. Most of the institutions are going through that period now of dealing with managing diversity.

CHAIR - Thank you. Michael. Do you have anything further?

Mr FERGUSON - No, thank you.

CHAIR - And Miriam? Thank you very much. I did interrupt one of our witnesses prior, Patrick.

Mr DORAN - Patrick may like to add something.

Mr SHAW - If I may Chair, I'm aware it's very tight on time and I'm very conscious of that and will address a very short remark. My interest in politics began with the knowledge of my grandfather, VJ Shaw MHA, member for Bass. He died in 1936 at the age of 61. As I grew up in a family of nine, six boys and three girls, I became aware of his commitment. He was married at the Church of Apostles in Launceston and he was a hairdresser in 1915. Ten years later he was invited by Joe Lyons, prominent Catholic, to run for Bass, and he did. My interest has been long held as I grew up.

As I grew up in Hobart, I was educated at St Peter's School near St Mary's Cathedral, now the Junior School for St Virgil's. I went on by train to St Virgil's, Austin's Ferry, later to Barrack Street, St Virgil's, which is now Guilford Young College. I knew Guilford Young, I can imitate him, but won't today. Across the road, at 99 Barrack Street in 1970 or 1971, Father Julian Punch was my parish priest. I was married at St Mary's Cathedral to an Anglican, Jean, and Archbishop Young gave permission for Dean Butterley from the Anglican cathedral to jointly marry us. We were married by Father Jarrett, now Bishop Jarrett, retired from Lismore in 1975, 50 years ago this year.

Why I say that is I'm here to say, with all the gravitas that comes with that kind of background, I suppose, that I support what Julian is saying and I don't want what he says to be taken lightly by people beyond these walls. I would urge the Archbishop to reconsider some of his positions, particularly given that his own Pope currently has perhaps indicated that he should.

Mr DORAN - Well said.

Mr PUNCH - It's very strong about self-determination. When I was a Catholic priest, everywhere I went, bullying and discrimination was happening in those schools. There were groups of young people who wanted to be heard. I was at Devonport and it was extreme. I found getting those people together and sitting down was very powerful. The young people came and talked about it. They were being bashed in school, they were being really badly treated. 'See, judge and act' is a very strong Catholic tradition from a Belgian cardinal who started the Young Christian Workers. His book read like a Marxist manual and a repetition of the Gospels.

Those groups were really powerful. They wrote their own report and they said, 'What do we do?' I said, 'What do you want to do?' So they went to the heads of the school, a Christian brother, who supported them and said that something should be done about it, but also a nun who didn't want it done and reported it to the Bishop. The Bishop came up, lectured the people. Lyons' son was a journalist at the time and he reported the Bishop saying, 'Young people are rootless and ruthless.' It was headlines in the paper the next day, to the amusement of many people. I got moved, the head brother got moved, but those young people today are still strong advocates. They learnt about self-determination. That's what I'm saying - it's not about charismatic leaders, but it is about self-determination. It's bringing people together, allowing them to talk. That should be happening.

At the moment, the service organisations, welfare is making a lot of money out of us. It doesn't need to. It should be about bringing gay people together with their friends. That's not costly. I think welfare organisations are significantly about funding, but self-determination is not. It's about bringing people together and helping them to say what they need to say.

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CHAIR - Thank you very much, Julian. I think that might be a great place to conclude our deliberations today.

Mr PUNCH - Thank you, Chair.

CHAIR - To yourself, Patrick and to Brian, thank you very much for presenting to our committee today.

Mr SHAW - Thank you.

Mr DORAN - Thank you.

CHAIR - We've appreciated your insight and your thoughts and your recommendations to our committee. I'll hand over to Josh, who is going to do the final formal part of today's hearing.

Mr WILLIE - Thank you, Anita. We recognise that during these hearings, we may have discussed highly sensitive matters that may have deeply impacted the lives of Tasmanians. This may be a trigger for individuals who have listened to or participated in the proceedings. I'd encourage anyone impacted by the content matter during this hearing to contact services and support such as Lifeline Tasmania on 1800 984 434, Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800 or Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636.

Finally, thank you for your appearance today. What you've said to us here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Once you leave this table, you need to be aware that that privilege does not attach to the comments you may make to anyone, including the media, even if you're just repeating what you said to us. Do you understand that?

WITNESSES - Yes, thank you.

Mr WILLIE - Thank you very much for your attendance today.

The witnesses withdrew.

The committee adjourned at 10.21 a.m.