

To: Bob Stensholt (State MP for Burwood)
Cc: Rob Hulls (Attorney General)
Michael Danby (Federal MP for Melbourne Ports)
Scott Davis (Victoria Police Gay & Lesbian Advisory Unit)
John Searle (President, JCCV)

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Mr Bob Stensholt
State MP for Burwood

22 August 2009

Dear Mr Stensholt,

As a constituent of Burwood I would like to bring a matter of great concern to your attention. It relates to the [media release](#) from the Attorney-General Mr Rob Hulls on July 24 2009 entitled "NEW SENTENCING LAWS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT HATE CRIME".

This media releases makes particular mention of both the Jewish and Gay & Lesbian communities:

"The Government will continue consult widely with the community on this issue, including with the Jewish Community Council of Victoria (JCCV), gay and lesbian groups, the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, student groups, cultural communities and interested individuals."

I head up an organisation called Aleph Melbourne that offers a social and support framework for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) Jews. I have been involved with the organisation since 1995, the year of its inception.

Having grown up in the Jewish community I am fully aware of the bigotry and intolerance that Jews face. My family was one of the many whose relatives were murdered in The Holocaust and I know full well what it is like to face discrimination as a Jew.

As a gay man I also know what it is like to face discrimination because of my sexuality and know of too many people who have suffered as victims of homophobic hate crimes and vilification.

Ten years ago, in 1999, Aleph Melbourne applied to the JCCV for membership. This was an extremely bitter time for the group and as a result of the failed application I was exposed to a level of hate and intolerance that would shock most people.

At the JCCV plenum meeting on May 10 1999 to decide the fate of Aleph Melbourne's application, the now dead Rabbi Ronald Lubofsky addressed the standing-room only gathering and denounced the organisation and homosexuals with the same venom and vitriol as Hitler spreading propaganda about the Jews. I have the transcript of his address on file which I can supply. For your enlightenment I refer you to an interview with both myself and Lubofsky on the ABC Religion Report [web site](#) from 19 May 1999. Also attending the 1999 plenum meeting was Rabbi Chaim Gutnik, who as President of the Rabbinical Council of Victoria, presented the ultimatum that the Orthodox bloc would be forced to withdraw their membership of the JCCV if Aleph Melbourne was granted membership.

The issue dominated the Jewish media for weeks leading up to the vote and many more thereafter. During this time there was no shortage of homophobic attacks and expressions of intolerance from all manner of community leaders at Aleph Melbourne's membership application. Again I can supply copies of these letters and interviews if required. It was so polarising that Aleph Melbourne was being held responsible by many for effectively splitting the community. However at no stage did anyone in a leadership position within the Jewish community speak out against this language of extreme hate and intolerance. To their credit, a lot of other community organisations and groups also offered support for Aleph Melbourne.

Wind forward to 2009, now ten years along. On July 10 this year, Rabbi Chaim Ingram, Honorary Secretary of the Rabbinical Council of NSW, wrote a [letter](#) to the Australian Jewish News where he unapologetically and unsympathetically lumped homosexuals alongside people who committed adultery, bestiality and incest and [later](#) went on to defend his stance, hiding behind the cover of Jewish law. This letter was in response to a [blog](#) about the Jewish community supporting same-sex marriage.

On August 1 in Tel Aviv there was the horrific shooting in the gay community centre where two people were killed and 15 people injured. The Australian Jewish News covered this event comprehensively. As a direct result of this coverage an anonymous Melbourne Orthodox Jewish blogger [posted](#) on AJNWatch some of the most hurtful language directed at gay people that I have ever read. These are just two recent examples of the strong homophobic attitudes prevalent in the Jewish community and in both cases they have gone unchallenged by the leaders of the Jewish community. In essence, staying silent about this hate is effectively condoning it.

As a man with a Catholic upbringing you will be fully aware of the sections of the Old Testament in the book of Leviticus that describe the prohibition against men having intercourse with other men and the penalties they must face if they transgress this prohibition. This prohibition forms a tenet of Orthodox Jewish dogma and is more fervently upheld than just about any other biblical commandment. The prohibition against homosexual intercourse (and effectively anything relating to any expression of homosexuality) permeates the teachings of Orthodox Judaism at all levels, through schools, colleges, synagogues and every other aspect of Orthodox Jewish life. I challenge you to find an Orthodox Rabbi in Australia who will not denounce practicing homosexuals as sinners and who will not refer to us alongside people who have committed sins of the gravity as murder, adultery, incest or bestiality.

This brings me to the purpose of my letter. I have recently approached the President of the JCCV John Searle and asked him and his executive to form a strategy to counter hate and intolerance directed at GLBT people emanating from within the Jewish community. Please refer to the attached copy of the letter I presented to the JCCV and a subsequent postscript. Referring to the above-mentioned media release:

"The Brumby Labor Government has been considering for some time the issue of violence and other crimes based on hatred of a person's race, gender, religion,

sexual orientation, age, disability, ethnicity or language," Mr Hulls said.

"We are looking at a range of reforms that send a clear message that attacks against any Victorian based on these factors cannot be tolerated."

I wish to bring to your attention that significant and powerful segments of the Victorian Jewish community and therefore by virtue of it's status as the community's peak body, the JCCV, are amongst the main protagonists of homophobic hate and intolerance in Victoria.

The JCCV may attempt to deny or trivialise my claims and discredit me and the organisation I represent, or even make claims to be taking some sort of generic affirmative action. However you can see from what I have stated above and read for yourself that homophobic attitudes and intolerance of GLBT people is endemic within these significant and powerful segments of the Jewish community. The JCCV must publicly state how they intend to redress this unacceptable situation.

Until such time as the JCCV can prove it has made significant efforts to remove this hate entirely and unequivocally denounce it, they must be held to account for being complicit in promoting homophobia and intolerance of GLBT people.

The Victorian Government must realise that whilst it attempts to prevent and deal with hate crimes against both the Jewish community and the GLBT community, there is a direct and incompatible conflict when there are members of the Jewish community who express fundamental beliefs that promote hatred towards and intolerance of GLBT people.

Should you wish to contact me, my email address is michael@aleph.org.au and mobile phone number is 0417 595 541.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Barnett
Aleph Melbourne