

PM with Mark Colvin

Monday to Friday from 6:10pm on ABC Local Radio and 5:10pm on Radio National.

Jewish leaders accused of ignoring homophobia

Alison Caldwell reported this story on Wednesday, September 16, 2009 18:34:00

MARK COLVIN: A rift is developing in Australia's Jewish community over the treatment of homosexuals.

A major gay and lesbian support group claims Jewish community leaders are ignoring discrimination and hate language aimed at homosexuals. It wants Jewish representative bodies to come up with a clear policy upholding gay rights.

Alison Caldwell reports.

ALISON CALDWELL: When two young people were shot dead in Tel Aviv last month at a gay and lesbian youth centre, Melbourne-based Michael Barnett wanted nothing more than for the leaders of the Australian Jewish community to take a stand against violence towards homosexuals. But he says his calls for action fell on deaf ears.

MICHAEL BARNETT: The Israeli leadership, the Prime Minister, the President of Israel, they spoke out against intolerance and hatred and said you know, everyone deserves respect.

Yet in Melbourne where there is the family of one of the two people killed, there wasn't even a single statement from the community leaders.

ALISON CALDWELL: He says the silence from the Jewish leadership was symptomatic of a much deeper problem.

MICHAEL BARNETT: There's a lot of intolerance of gay people in the Jewish people. Calling gay people perverted and disgusting, comparing gay people to people who commit incest or bestiality, there's all this language that gets used from people like some rabbis in the orthodox world who speak out against gay people.

ALISON CALDWELL: Michael Barnett is the coordinator of Aleph Melbourne, a support group for homosexual people in the Jewish community. He believes representative groups are afraid to express their support for homosexuals for fear of offending ultra-orthodox groups in the community.

MICHAEL BARNETT: I want every state and national Jewish peak body in Australia to have a specific, unambiguous policy addressing the persecution of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews in regard to homophobic hate and intolerance, irrespective of whether it originates from outside or inside the Jewish community.

The policies must be enforced with the same zero tolerance afforded to anti-Semitism and holocaust rhetoric and other hate crimes.

ALISON CALDWELL: Much of his anger is levelled at a Jewish blog which recently described

homosexuality as "depravity and debasement" and extolled the virtues of reprogramming homosexuals.

In July, a Sydney rabbi wrote to the Australian Jewish News, comparing homosexual intercourse with adultery, bestiality and incest.

JOHN SEARLE: If it's a matter that's guided by religious laws, then those laws will presumably be applied. Now I can't say very much about those because I'm not an expert in those areas.

ALISON CALDWELL: John Searle is the president of the Jewish Community Council in Victoria. It describes itself as the roof body of Victorian Jewry. On its website, it says it shows zero tolerance towards anti-Semitism and racism but it has nothing to say about supporting or protecting gay or lesbian people within the Jewish community.

JOHN SEARLE: If we need to rewrite a policy that was written some time ago, we can certainly look at that and if it needs to be adjusted in any way, we can adjust that.

ALISON CALDWELL: John Searle says he's against vilification of any sort.

JOHN SEARLE: The JCCV has issued statements condemning vilification of all minority groups, including vilification based on grounds of sexual orientation, sexual preference.

ALISON CALDWELL: He says the council has sought advice from numerous sources on how to be more inclusive and will invite gay and lesbian support groups to events in the future.

Michael Barnett says it's not enough.

MICHAEL BARNETT: Lip service, motherhood statements, platitudes, rhetoric, anything but "yes, we're going to do this and take it seriously".

JOHN SEARLE: I reject the allegation or assertion that inviting people to participate in community events is simply lip service.

ALEX FEIN: My blog is called The Sensible Jew.

ALISON CALDWELL: Jewish blogger Alex Fein has written about the issue in recent weeks. She says the vast majority of Jews support homosexuals and describes those who don't as minority extremists. But she says groups like the Jewish Community Council of Victoria need to be more proactive.

ALEX FEIN: It's not enough to say that homophobia is problematic. I think all people of good faith would like to see concrete action.

MARK COLVIN: Alex Fein the author of the blog known as the sensiblejew.wordpress.com, ending Alison Caldwell's report.

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