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Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade - 15/10/99 - Australia's efforts to promote and protect freedom of religion and belief

CHAIR — On behalf of the subcommittee I welcome representatives of Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. The subcommittee prefers that all evidence be given in public but should you at any stage wish to give evidence in private you may ask to do so and the committee will give consideration to your request. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the House itself. I invite you to make a short opening statement if you wish and we will then proceed to questions.

Mr MacLean — I would like to express appreciation for coming before the committee. Most religions espouse principles of tolerance and morality and thus the free practice of religion can promote stability within a community.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights show that the international community believes religious freedom to be of very considerable importance. Nevertheless, throughout the world religious intolerance continues and is increasing.

As far as Jehovah's Witnesses are concerned, the intolerance is exhibited by both secular authorities and religious groups. So we must, at the outset, say that much of the discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses by governments is supported or instigated by other religions. While Jehovah's Witnesses stay clear of politics and do not try to use religious influence to steer or control governments, this is not the case with many major and minor religions.

In our submission we directed attention to some conspicuous examples of discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses. We did so to highlight failings within the systems in which they occur. For example, a parliamentary inquiry into dangerous religious sects in France obtained its information about Jehovah's Witnesses from those who oppose us, and they did not seek or accept information from the Witnesses themselves. Thus the published report was based on misinformation.

We believe that discrimination seldom occurs in a vacuum. Thus, to eradicate religious intolerance, the climate for religious tolerance must first be improved. There also has to be an international and unbiased source of reliable information on religions, on their beliefs and practices.

Religious discrimination and persecution is often based also on fear. Fear is often based on inaccurate information. For example, one hears of the Jonestown mass suicide and the

Waco Texas massacre and assumes that, because Jehovah's Witnesses are zealous in their religious worship, they promote blind loyalty and members would commit suicide.

Despite the guarantees of religious freedom contained in the Constitution of Singapore, Jehovah's Witnesses are under a ban in that country. Their religious and

morally up-building literature, including copies of the authorised King James version of the Bible published by the Watchtower Society, and publications that are freely distributed throughout Australia and much of the rest of the world, are considered 'undesirable publications'.

This action by the Singapore government is based on the stand taken by the Witnesses to remain neutral in military and political matters. In most countries, authorities have come to realise that the Jehovah's Witnesses' position in this regard poses no real threat to national security. Individuals have been imprisoned – some have lost their jobs – and the courts have not upheld their rights under Singapore's constitution. So that is Singapore.

Despite the guarantee of freedom of religion found in article 28 of the 1993 Russian constitution, Russia has recently enacted legislation restricting the activity of religions considered to be 'foreign' or 'new'. While Jehovah's Witnesses have been accepted for registration recently as a recognised religion in Russia, attempts have been made to close meetings and disrupt religious activities, and the clergy of the traditional faiths support and vigorously advocate these measures in Russia.

Several criminal investigations have been brought against the Moscow congregation but each investigation has been closed because the allegations were demonstrated to be false. At this time a civil prosecution is continuing and seems to be putting non-orthodox theological beliefs on trial rather than adhering to the rule of law or allowing freedom of belief in that country.

In France and throughout Europe there is a move to impose crippling taxes on Jehovah's Witnesses. We have been in France now for over a hundred years and we are the third largest Christian religion in that country. The French government is currently attempting to impose a 60 per cent tax on all donations made to Jehovah's Witnesses. The tax is imposed on no other religious organisation. This action is based on a report which classified Jehovah's Witnesses as not being a religion but rather a sect – and this is the land of liberty, equality and fraternity, as you know.

From time to time we have received support from non-government organisations, particularly in exposing the persecution. We have also received support from the American embassy, the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and the President's wife, Hillary Clinton. However if any international steps taken by Australia in support of religious freedom are to be truly effective, Australia needs to consider whether it is upholding the principles of religious freedom at home. I just give two examples highlighting something in our submissions to the committee. Firstly, we notice that the present Australian state laws permit blood transfusions to be administered to minors without parental consent and, secondly, we note the discriminatory manner in which adoption laws are applied to Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia.

In summary, we believe that at home the Australian legislation should be amended to permit parents to obtain medical treatment for their children without violating their conscience and to prevent religious discrimination in child adoption. This may include clarification of section 116 of the Australian Constitution. Abroad, we believe that Australia could be actively aware of religious discrimination and be prepared to make representation and speak out against violations of freedom of religion. Perhaps we could see non-government organisations supporting this work, particularly as a watchdog of religious freedom, but we believe the Australian government must at least voice strong objections to these violations.

Senator SCHACHT – I want to raise this issue that you have raised at great length in your submission on blood transfusion and the role of law in Australia. You say this is an invasion of your religious beliefs. On page 33 of your submission you say:

Jehovah's Witnesses base their stand concerning blood transfusions on the law of God as set out in the Holy Bible.

Can you tell me what part of the Holy Bible deals with blood transfusion?

Mr MacLean – We have the Book of Acts in chapter 15, verses 19, 20, 28 and 29 which talk about blood and the misuse of blood. The first meeting of the newly formed

Christian congregationâ€ what you might term their governing bodyâ€ had to make a decision about the Gentiles, the non-Jews, coming into the Christian congregation. The use of blood was not prohibited to them but it was to the Jews, so we had the decision there being made by this group of Christian men that blood was not to be taken. It was equated with fornication and with idolatry, so blood was a prohibited substance to be taken by the Christians.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Which Holy Bible are we talking about?

Mr MacLean â€ The King James version or any Bible that we have in this country.

Senator SCHACHT â€ That was written nearly 400 years ago in the early 17th century. Are you confident that the versions of the Bible going back to 1,600 years before that have the same description as you say the Acts have about blood transfusion?

Mr MacLean â€ Yes. You will find any translation of the Bible that you could pick up in this countryâ€ any modern version or old versionâ€ would have the same text exactly.

Senator SCHACHT â€ The same text?

Mr MacLean â€ Yes.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Again, I cannot claim any great knowledge of the Bible, but are you the only Christian church or denomination that has interpreted that section of the Bible to mean that blood transfusion is not allowed?

Mr MacLean â€ Probably so, yes.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Do you agree with the legislation that the Australian parliament has put through to ban female genital mutilation and circumcision that is carried out for cultural reasons in countries that are overwhelmingly, but not totally, non-Christian?

Mr MacLean â€ I think any person in this country would feel that is a very cruel and unnecessary operation.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Which is life threatening.

Mr MacLean â€ Yes, very much so.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Couldn't the absence of a blood transfusion be life threatening as well?

Mr MacLean â€ We do not view it that way. Perhaps Mr Toole might like to make some comments about that.

Mr Toole â€ In answer to your question as to whether this has been a standard. If we just remove emotion from the discussion because it is a fairly emotive subject and the newspapers tend to blow it up that wayâ€

Senator SCHACHT â€ I am just quoting what you have written, not what the newspapers have written.

Mr Toole â€ What I was mentioning is that the scriptures simply say to abstain from blood. It is not an ambiguous statement. If you go to the doctor and he says, 'Abstain from alcohol', it is not as though what he means is complicated. Jehovah's Witnesses interpret 'abstain from blood' to mean, effectively abstain from blood and have nothing whatever to do with it. To take the point that you raised, I will take you back to a historical quotation from Tertullian. He lived from 160 to 230. He says:

Let your unnatural ways blush before the Christians. We do not even have the blood of animals at our meals for these consist of ordinary food. . . . At the trials of Christians you [hyphen]

That is the pagan Romansâ€

offer them sausages filled with blood. You are convinced, of course, that the very thing with which you try to make them deviate from the right way is unlawful for them. How is it that, when you are confident that they will shudder at the blood of an animal, you believe that they pant eagerly at human blood.

The interdict upon `blood' we shall understand to be much more upon human blood.

So effectively what that is saying is that back there one of the ways they used to establish who were Christians was to try to get them to violate the edict on blood. They tried to get people to eat blood sausages et cetera. The point I am making is that this was understood back in the early Christian church to be a prohibition.

Senator SCHACHT â€ In any of the testaments, did Christ himself use the phrase, `to abstain from blood'?

Mr MacLean â€ Not specifically, no, but he quoted God's law continually hundreds of times including various parts of the law of God which contain this very prominently in it.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Which law of God is that?

Mr MacLean â€ That is the old Hebrew law that was given to the Hebrew Jews of which Jesus was, of course, a Jew himself. He was familiar with the laws.

Senator SCHACHT â€ He was Jewish, of course. He was born a Jew. Back to the Old Testament and the Hebrew view, we should have asked this question when we had the Jewish people before us here before lunch. As far as I am aware, I do not think they ban blood transfusions.

Mr MacLean â€ No.

Senator SCHACHT â€ If it was an old Hebrew law, one would have thought it would have had some standing in Jewish practice and theology.

Mr MacLean â€ We would agree. We wonder why.

Senator SCHACHT â€ I see. I just want to turn now to the well-documented case from your point of view about children and the complaint that we have laws in Australia in all states giving medical practitioners the right to overrule the parents. Do you not think it is reasonable that, until a child is old enough to make up their own minds and has got some maturity, they should have the right to decide whether they have a blood transfusion which, if they do not have it, might actually mean that they die?

Mr MacLean â€ Do you mean the child?

Senator SCHACHT â€ The parents are imposing a view on the child at a very young age when the child has no ability to make their own judgment. I accept that. But surely you should give the child the chance to live long enough so that they can have the maturity of views to make a judgment that if they then choose to follow the views of the Jehovah Witnesses and not have blood transfusion, they make that choice and take the consequences. For the parents to impose a life or death issue on children who have not yet the ability to think for themselves, I have to say I find a complete and absolute attack on that child's human rights and their right to live.

Mr Toole â€ What you are sayingâ€ can I be pretty straight?

Senator SCHACHT â€ You can be as straight as you like. It is under privilege, so say what you like.

Mr Toole â€ What you are saying effectively starts on a premise that blood is not in itself a dangerous therapy. Medically, that is not necessarily the case. For example, just to quote Dr James Isbister, one of the leading haematologists in this country, quoted in an editorial in the *Medical Journal of Australia* . He says:

The fact that blood transfusion can be lethal has never been doubted, but the laity (sic) and many members of the medical profession have thought that the risks related only to the blood group. The long list of potential complications of homologous blood transfusion has been well known for many years and is ever increasing, but the fact that HIV can be transmitted by blood component therapy has taken the medical, nursing and scientific sectors of the health care profession, as well as patients, rapidly up the learning curve. A blood transfusion was previously seen as the gift of life, but the tables have been turned and the general perception now is that bloodless surgery and the avoiding of transfusion may be the gift of life.

All I am saying is that medically there is another side to the story, I am sure, in the light of some of the recent events that we have had even in this country. We have got hundreds of people suing the Red Cross as a result of getting hepatitis from blood transfusions. We have had an instance just recently in Melbourne involving a doctor where, in spite of what he was asked for, a young child tragically received AIDS from an infected blood transfusion.

All I am saying is that anybody who is going to have a blood transfusion in this day and age, whether for themselves or their children, is going to have to do a risk-benefit analysis. They are going to have to weigh up the benefits as opposed to the potential risks. If you read the submission that came in, particularly the one that we put in with it, it showed that virtually every kind of medical treatment can be done without transfusions. I will just round up my comment by citing a newspaper article written by the Chairman of Urology at Long Island College Hospital in New York. The article is entitled 'Are blood transfusions any longer necessary?'. The author says:

The introduction of bloodless medicine and surgery have brought the issue of blood transfusion into sharper focus.

.....

Today blood would probably not be approved as a medication, since it would not fulfill safety criteria of the Food and Drug Administration.

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The lack of hard data on the benefit of transfusion has added to the confusion surrounding transfusion practice. The benefit is so questionable that many surgeons have adopted a philosophy of "transfusion avoidance" not only for medical but also for legal reasons.

He concludes by saying:

It is quite possible that in the very near future transfusion will be eliminated altogether.

.....

Transfusion is not only costly and dangerous; it simply does not provide the highest quality of care that patients deserve.

So our position basically is this. We do not have a blood transfusion for ourselves or our families, because the Bible says to abstain from blood. It is a religious position we take. But for people that are prepared to go out and do some research medically they find there is an awful lot of evidence that makes it make sense medically. I guess that is the reason why the doctor in Melbourne said what he said. I finish with a quotation from the *Bulletin* of 10 August:

Why did you have concerns about blood being made available?

My concerns about blood donation arise as a result of my training. Especially as a surgeon, one is constantly doing a risk-benefit analysis on behalf of the patient and trying to choose the right course. As far as transfusion is concerned, I know that there is a risk of infection, and I know that any blood bank has to trade off cost versus benefit in searching for viruses. I am aware how slow public health authorities seem to move in keeping up with the latest information on HIV. Blood banks are inevitably reactive, responding, sometimes slowly, to what other researchers have found, and sometimes choosing not to adopt the most recent advances out of costs restraints. With this knowledge it is only natural to have a healthy scepticism.

Are your concerns shared by the larger medical community?

The reason . . . why the blood bank and the Royal Children's Hospital seem a little defensive is that they would probably agree. I think most parents who are doctors would have done exactly the same thing . . .

All I am saying is that a lot of people, for medical reasons, would choose that. We are not saying in our recommendation that the law should not exist. What we have said is that there may well be circumstances arise where it does become an absolute life and death issue. We have said that in those circumstances that is the way the law should be framed. In its present form, the law is not framed that way and it allows an invasion of the family and an overruling of the principles of that family in circumstances that really do not call for that at all. It is in that sense that the laws are quite discriminatory.

Senator SCHACHT â€ You have quoted two different doctors. I presume if I rang the AMA and we sought the AMA's view or the view of the medical profession in various areas we would probably get 20 doctors saying the opposite. I presume when the legislation was brought down through state parliaments it was done very much with the support of the medical profession in Australia. I do not think members of parliament would have stepped in in a lively way to move such legislation without medical discussion and consultation.

CHAIR â€ I think you have put your question and, whether you agree or not, we have had the response. I suggest we move on.

Senator SCHACHT â€ I just want to say that I think the legislation actually protects the child's human rights and I think that the state has done the correct thing.

Mr HOLLIS â€ My apologies for coming in a little late; I was delayed downstairs. I am fairly ignorant about Jehovah's Witnesses. Could you just give me a little bit of a thumbnail sketch of roughly the numbers in Australia and the activities you engage in in Australia.

Mr MacLean â€ We have currently in the vicinity of 100,000 associates in the country. I came from Canada myself 51 years ago. When I arrived here there were about 3,500 active witnesses. It has grown very much in that time. We have 760 congregations in the various states. We have annual conventions. We will have one at the superdome here at the end of this month. There will be about 15,000 here in Sydney. We just had about 20,000 up in Brisbane and over in Perth last weekend another 12,000. We have these annually. Our work is involved in the public ministry. As you probably all knowâ€ you have been visited by one of our people, no doubt, at some time in the pastâ€

CHAIR â€ Two, as I recall. Usually two.

Mr MacLean â€ Usually two, that is right. Our objective in doing that is to start Bible studies with people in their homes if possible. We leave literature. You have seen this magazine, *Awake!*, I am sure, lots of times. We left a copy of that one on religious intolerance with you. The *Watchtower* is published now in 135 languages, about 20 million copies every issue, so it is widely read throughout the world. We print them here at our place in Ingleburn. That is a little bit of our work.

Mr HOLLIS â€ You are not vegetarian, are you?

Mr MacLean â€ No, no. We have no dietary laws as such.

Senator SCHACHT â€ You have never eaten blood.

Mr MacLean â€ Just blood, that is all. We do not feed on blood; that is right.

Senator SCHACHT â€ But you eat red meat.

Mr MacLean â€ Nothing that has blood in it do we eat. We avoid that very muchâ€ like blood sausage.

Senator SCHACHT â€ So you do not eat your steaks rare then.

Mr MacLean â€ There again, you are coming into a fine line. The Bible says to drain the blood. It should be drained. We do that.

Mr HOLLIS â€ The point I was trying to make before Senator Schacht intervened is this: you said you had no dietary laws, and I accept that, but I was interested to ask if you were vegetarian, because it would seem to meâ€ I am not an expert in the fieldâ€ that unless you treat meat specifically it must contain an element of blood.

Mr MacLean â€ Yes. Obviously, yes. You do not spin-dry it or something like that.

Mr HOLLIS â€ You said you had no dietary laws. You do not treat the meat in a special way? You go and buy your meat the same as I go and buy meat?

Mr MacLean â€ We guarantee that it is bled before we touch it. Whether it is chickens or beef, or whatever it might be, it has to be properly bled. We have beef cattle on our property as a matter of fact, and that is supervised very carefully.

Mr HOLLIS â€ So you have a special butchery?

Mr MacLean â€ No, it is done by registered butcheries and so on. But we are very conscious of the fact that it must be bled.

Mr Toole â€ It does not have any special kind of bleeding; it is just bled as in the abattoirs. That is all the Bible says had to be doneâ€ blood poured out on the ground. God's people back in ancient times were permitted to eat the flesh. In many ways we are pretty normal, but we obey the law when it says 'Abstain from blood'.

Mr HOLLIS â€ That is all, thank you.

Senator PAYNE â€ I have one frivolous question and one serious question. I am taken by the reference on page 48 of your submission, or the part of your submission relating to adoption questions, that Jehovah's Witnesses are more qualified to be adoptive parents because they do not participate in dangerous sports. Is that a universal application to Jehovah's Witnessesâ€ that nobody boxes, bungee jumps, hang-glides, et cetera? That is the frivolous one, you will be relieved to know. It is just an interesting thing to have in a submission, and I am slightly curious. I suppose golf could be dangerous.

Mr MacLean â€ We view our lives as something dedicated to God. In other words, we are doing the will of God, we consider, when we give that dedication and have the baptism as we engage in. Therefore, what we do with our lives is very important. We have no right to just on whim or impulse jump off a bridge or go bungee jumping and engage in very risky sports like you mentioned. Anything of that nature is abuse of our lives, we consider, so we try to preserve our lives in the service of God. That is the basic principle there.

Senator PAYNE â€ The serious question is in relation to your detailed submission on violations against your religion in various parts of the worldâ€ France in particular, but you go on to mention Eritrea, Armenia, Singapore and so on. There are a number of human rights organisations and human rights activist organisations in the world, such as Amnesty, with whom we met earlier this morning. When you put forward to this committee examples like this of violations of religious freedom, do you work with organisations like that in countries? Do you approach them for support to assist your members or your associates with these problems, or do you campaign alone to look after them and help them?

Mr Toole â€ We will take all the help we can getâ€ anybody at all that is prepared to stand up and be counted. For example, in those court cases in Singapore, Amnesty, as I understand, came and sat down in those cases and listened to all that was presented there. They came to us for information. We supplied every bit of information we possibly could to try and assist. We feel that at the end of the day that is probably one of the means that could be promoted to a much greater degree to try and address these issues, because what ends up happening, as Mr MacLean's opening

highlighted, is that you end up with a lot of misinformation and disinformation about things. If I wanted to know about you, I would not go and speak to someone who has got some other agenda that is opposed to you.

Senator PAYNE â€ There would be many who would help you with that.

Mr Toole â€ But I think it would be appropriate to come to you and to people who can look at your situation objectively. So an organisation like Amnesty International, who one would think does not have a hidden agenda or some other agenda, is prepared to objectively look at what is the position and then can make a report to those various organisations that are, in fact, working difficulties on our people and other religious groups as well. It would be considered a non-partisan group who would be very much in a position to be able to have a real input.

We have this situation in Europe where we are categorised as almost something out of a science fiction movie in some of these places, in some of these newspaper articles. People

are happy to take that aboard and then act on that basis even at governmental level. It is an extraordinary proposition. Yet we feel that organisations like Amnesty should be approached and should be fed information, for want of a better word, so that they can then make representations to those governments as an objective body that really is just objectively endeavouring to present the facts.

Senator PAYNE â€ In relation to France, I understood Mr MacLean to say that you were the third largest Christian religion in France.

Mr MacLean â€ Yes.

Senator PAYNE â€ How is it that you have achieved such a size, if you like, when the environment is obviously not a particularly conducive one at this stage?

Mr MacLean â€ Do you mean because it is predominantly a Catholic country?

Senator PAYNE â€ No, because of the attitude that you presented in your report of government and so on.

Mr MacLean â€ We have been operating in France for 100 years, as you notice there. There is a movement in France right now, because of this sectarian thing that has developed in the last few yearsâ€ these weird sects that we have seen developingâ€ and the country has become very sensitive to that type of thing. People are being classified as dangerous sects or dangerous cults. It has become a very prominent classification now in France, and that is what is making it so difficult for us because we are just lumped in with all the other ones.

Senator PAYNE â€ How many members or associates would you have?

Mr MacLean â€ We have about 200,000 in France. We find it very strange that they have classified us as a dangerous sect without any proper understanding of the operations of our work at all. They have gone to the opposing side and accepted, gullibly, what the opposers to us have told them. They have accepted that as gospel truth and they have acted upon that, so we are very active in France trying to clarify that point, distributing publications and going through various means to inform the people of the true position of the Witnesses.

CHAIR â€ Can I just pursue that a little bit? I do not think there is much doubt that there are groups or sects, whatever label you might apply, that most of us would regard as not in the public interest. There are people who commit acts of violence or mass suicides or whatever. What suggestions would you have as to how civilised society either defines sects or, if you cannot effectively come up with a worthwhile definition of sect or if it is not possible, how society protects itself from groups that it perceives as doing the wrong sort of thing? How does society say, 'That group is okay, but that group isn't'?

Mr MacLean â€ That is really what we are engaged in: the idea of informing people, studying with them and endeavouring to help them to reason and to be able to divide correctly what is right and what is wrong. I would just use a scriptural

quotation. The apostle Paul said that mature people are those who, through use, have their perceptive powers trained to distinguish both right and wrong. That is from the book of Hebrews, chapter 5,

verse 14. That is the principle we would use, and we try to help people mature in their assessment of anything to do with religion. It is all very well to be dogmatic and say, 'I'm right and you're wrong.' But, then, where is the proof of it? Can you stand up and give an intelligent account of your beliefs and why you believe this? We believe the basis for that should be the Bible.

CHAIR € You have been active in France for 100 years and you have got 200,000 members, but they are still classifying you as a sect and they slug you with a 60 per cent tax which they would not other religions, which is a fairly draconian measure, although I suppose in other countries they may not be as civilised as to apply their prejudices with tax€ they might do it by more direct means. Are you saying that really means that you have not actually got your message across in all that time with that number of people?

Mr MacLean € Not to the government officials.

Mr Toole € Mr MacLean has had a personal experience and I thought it might be nice if he could share it. He was actually in Quebec and, if you know much about history, Jehovah's Witnesses in Quebec were absolutely vilified in the most dastardly way at the time of the Second World War. He was there, part of it all. So he has actually seen first-hand what has now historically been demonstrated to be an absolute abuse of power in the entire system. Maybe a comment or two from him about that might enlighten your committee as to what it is like to be on the other end of that.

Mr MacLean € I think you have a submission here from the *Human Rights Without Frontiers* . Did we leave a copy of that with the committee?

CHAIR € Yes.

Mr MacLean € We have a few copies here if you would like to see them.

Senator HARRADINE € It is in their submission.

CHAIR € Yes, we have got it.

Mr Toole € We just left you some additional ones in case you did not all have a copy, that was all.

Senator HARRADINE € It is in the submission.

CHAIR € I have seen that somewhere.

Mr MacLean € This gentleman here pictured in the front is Mr Glen How from Canada. He took up the case of Jehovah's Witnesses in Quebec and fought that through for years to the Supreme Court. He finally won a very big victory in the Supreme Court for freedom of worship in Quebec. It became a national issue and the whole country was incensed over what took place in Quebec. The thing was that, at that time, there was no bill of rights in Canada, very much like in Australia. It was assumed that everyone had freedom of worship

in Canada, that there was no problem. But that Quebec issue was a stunning example of how freedom of worship can be denied to people in a country and on a grand scale.

At one time there were 1,800 people under arrest in Quebec for going about their work as Jehovah's Witnesses. There was no freedom of assembly; they would break into our meeting places. They had a big headline in the paper that Premier Maurice Duplissis of the province had 'declared war on Jehovah's Witnesses'. It was quite a thing back in the 1940s and 1950s.

Finally, this bill of rights was brought in mainly because of the fight of Glen How in the Supreme Court in this case of Jehovah's Witnesses. As you know, that became legislation and it is part of the country's arrangements now. I just thought it would be

interesting to mention - that because I remember so well the issue it was in Canada just before I came to Australia in the late 1940s.

Senator PAYNE — I was just going to say: is that why you left Canada?

Mr MacLean — No, I love Canada like I love Australia.

Senator HARRADINE — On page 57, in the conclusion of your submission, you state that:

Throughout the world, different reasons exist for religious discrimination, from misunderstanding the beliefs involved to being unwilling to accept another, possible non-traditional, view.

Could you expand on that, please, and what you think most often lies behind religious intolerance shown by governments or by individuals?

Mr Toole — If I can I will just explain it to you firstly so you understand our position in terms of that, and then I will go directly to answering your question. We take the view that we know that everybody we talk to is not going to agree with me or you. We understand that. But the fact that people do not necessarily agree with the position or your understanding of something does not mean you become intolerant of their view or that you cannot live with it. If we all had to be exactly the same on everything, it would be a rather unusual world. But we believe education—

CHAIR — You are fine as long as everybody agrees with me.

Mr Toole — Particularly in our situation. We call on people. If you have ever thought about being on our side of the door, for example, you have to become a pretty tolerant person because you get all sorts of views on all sorts of things. It is really quite fascinating to know what people believe and why they believe it. Now, I do not have to agree or disagree.

Senator HARRADINE — Politicians do doorknock from time to time.

Mr Toole — I guess so, and I guess it is the same thing— you will disagree but yet you are the best of friends. That is the view we take. The fact that people do not necessarily

share our particular understanding and they think, 'Oh no, that is the not the way I want to believe it,' is fine. We are really trying to educate people and teach tolerance. That really is getting at the very root cause of the problem. It is fanaticism that causes some of these problems, where people have a singular view that their way is right and woe betide anybody who disagrees with it. It gets to the stage, when you start having that elevated to a level of government, where you have a very dangerous situation because then you are only one step away from totalitarianism, where you have people in high places deciding what you can and cannot believe on a whole host of things.

Tying in with your question before about what should governments do, I would have thought in a free society that people should be able to have whatever beliefs they want unless they become detrimental or positively disruptive to society at large. The price we pay for a free society is to allow people to have whatever opinions they want, unless it gets to the stage where they are destroying the public order. Now, whether or not it is destroying the public order should be a matter for objective analysis, not a subjective, bigoted type of imposition of other people's wills.

That is why we feel that, a lot of times, these people that have caused us tremendous difficulty have got a hidden agenda. For example, in Russia— and I do not think I am being unkind when I say this— the Russian Orthodox Church sees anybody that arrives there as a threat. We go out and we talk to people, and a lot of people are very interested in what we have to say. As a result, they study and they learn a lot of things and they wonder, 'Well, why weren't we taught all these things out of our own bibles before?' That really has disrupted a lot of what is going on in Russia. Many people have decided to espouse the beliefs that we are sharing. That is their choice. That is entirely their choice, but the Russian Orthodox Church sees that

as a great threat. Now they have gone and framed mischief by law and all manner of media releases and disinformation.

One classic example in the midst of this court case going on over there that Mr MacLean mentioned is that of three young girls who committed suicide by jumping out of a window. Why they jumped out of the window, I have no idea, but the next thing is we are across the front page of the paper. This was the result of Jehovah's Witnesses having something to do with them and motivating them to commit suicide. How do you attack that kind of disinformation? That is extraordinary. We have nothing whatever to do with these people. We have no idea who they are. But you can see what is happening: it is not an objective body trying to allow people to have freedom of thoughts but rather it is somebody with a hidden agenda.

If Amnesty International or some other organisation could provide input to those governments, and if governments like Australia's were prepared to make representations to those governments and say, 'This has been our experience,' that should go a long way towards helping the situation. To the extent that we can educate people and help them not be frightened of gremlins, that is also good.

Senator HARRADINE € Are you in constant dialogue with other religions?

Mr MacLean € Not specifically, Senator, no.

Senator HARRADINE € Is there any reason for that? Are you part of the Council of Churches, for example, here in Australia?

Mr MacLean € We do not become involved in interfaith movements as such. We respect other religions, as Mr Toole mentioned. We know that everyone has a right to their own beliefs and when we visit people we try to have dialogue with them of different faiths, but we do not have conferences with faiths as such on a higher level. We prefer to go to people individually and to talk to them on that basis.

Senator HARRADINE € Do you see the benefit in the ecumenical movement amongst Christians to finally become totally united or not?

Mr MacLean € We do not think that will be of benefit because, from our viewpoint, so many of those that are involved in that type of thing are not particularly involved in the Bible teaching. We do not agree with their philosophies and their background quite frequently. Just let me give you one example. Virtually all of the churches in this country have, as their basic creed, the doctrine of the Trinity. They often say you cannot even become a member of the Council of Churches unless you believe that doctrine. We do not believe it. We think it is diametrically opposed to the Bible teaching. We emphasise, as one God, Jehovah and his son, Jesus Christ. So just from that angle alone, at basic teaching we could not go along with those people who believe this and unite with them in the common cause.

Senator HARRADINE € What about common prayer with other religions that believe in one God € Christian religions and, say, the Muslim religion? Do you come together? I am trying to see what actions maybe you are taking to break down the barriers.

Mr MacLean € Yes, I understand what you mean, Senator.

Senator HARRADINE € And the prejudices for that matter.

Mr MacLean € We are very much in favour of breaking down the prejudices and having people see eye to eye but, again, may I just emphasise that we cannot go along with the basic teachings of these churches. For that reason we do not act intolerantly toward them, but we say, 'Let us see what the Scriptures say. Let us come to a common understanding of what God's word says, which you also profess to believe.' In that way we become united in the Bible teaching. That is what we emphasise. So that is the position.

We are not intolerant toward them. They have a right to believe that. But we do not feel that we can have unity and prayer with them or fellowship with them because of

their teachings. They are praying to a Trinity God which we do not believe in. We are praying to a Jehovah God whom we believe is supreme.

CHAIR â€ So if, for argument's sakeâ€ heaven forbidâ€ a terrorist bomb exploded and this building crumbled and we were all killed, there are people in this room who are Catholics, there are yourselves and there are those who have no faith at all. That is on the public record this morning. After the initial trauma and so on, it is likely there would be a memorial service. Would you join with other religions or churches in a joint memorial service for

those who perished in this terrible tragedy or would you stand aside from that and have your own totally separate service? I think this is what Senator Harradine was getting at.

Mr MacLean â€ We will take an example of what happened with that terrible train crash in Britain. Individuals certainly have a feeling of compassion and concern for those people who perished and we certainly want them to be remembered by God, as well as, naturally, by their loved ones and so on. That would be an individual matter of choice. Some individuals from our people may want to go along and express condolences, and even say a prayer on behalf of those people that they might be remembered by God.

CHAIR â€ There were multidenominational commemorative services there.

Mr MacLean â€ Yes.

CHAIR â€ You are saying that your church as an organisation would not officially participate in that?

Mr MacLean â€ As an organisation we would probably not be there, no, but individuals have that right.

Senator SCHACHT â€ You said before that in Quebec you were opposed and you said that in Russia you were opposed by the Orthodox Church. Is the opposition to Jehovah's Witnesses around the world overwhelmingly from other Christian religions? Is that where you see most of your opposition?

Mr MacLean â€ Yes, and also, of course the Islamic faith is very hostile to our work.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Is the hostility from other Christian churches because, as you say, you do not believe in the Trinity; I presume that means that you see Christ as a prophet of God and not a divine figure.

Mr MacLean â€ We see him as God's son, subordinate to his Father.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Is that the reason why they oppose you?

Mr MacLean â€ That is just one. That is a basic doctrinal difference.

Senator SCHACHT â€ I can understand that.

Mr MacLean â€ We have a parallel in the case of our Lord Jesus when he was on the Earth, and the early Christians. They were very much opposed by the Jewish clergy and system at that time because they were not with them in their thinking and their practices. Jesus called them hypocrites in his case. He was very forthright in his condemnation of their hypocrisy and so on. That was the standard Jewish system at that time. The Christians left that system and they were vilified because they would not go along with the popular opinion that tied the thinking at that time. Our Lord stuck very closely to the scriptures and quoted them continually in his ministry. They cut right across the traditional teachings of the church

back then. He said, 'You have made the word of God invalid by your traditions.' In other words, they put tradition far above the word of God.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Who was the Jewish God?

Mr MacLean â€ The Jewish God was Jehovah. They professed to worship Jehovah but they did not, really.

Senator SCHACHT â€ Is the doctrinal thing the reason that you think they are opposing you?

Mr MacLean â€ That is what Jesus saidâ€ that their doctrines were above the word of God, and that incensed them.

Senator SCHACHT â€ I do not want to get into a theological debate, but on the record have they expressed any other attitude about the activities of your church that they find offensiveâ€ I raised one myself earlier onâ€ that meant they have been active in opposing your Christianity?

Mr MacLean â€ Mr Toole mentioned a moment ago what happened in Russia. The predominant church there, the Russian Orthodox Church, is worried that inroads are being made into their populace. They have the domain there, which is their sacred domain of all these multitudes of Russian peopleâ€ the traditional church of the country.

In Quebec, as you know, it was a very strong church oriented society there. I guess you all know about that. The same thing happened there: we would approach a village or a little town to do some of our witnessing and meeting people. They would ring the church bells and school bells. The school would be emptied and there would be a great mass of young people and others joined together to drive our people out of the city or the town. That went on for years, until finally we had to take some action to expose it, and that inflamed the thing tremendously. That is when they declared war on us. That is the reason why we have the opposition: it is a feeling of concern that we are invading their flocks.

Senator PAYNE â€ I have read in a number of the submissions a reference to voting. Do members of the church not vote?

Mr MacLean â€ No. We do not take sides politically; we avoid that. We maintain a neutral stand in regard to those things.

Senator SCHACHT â€ You do not vote?

Senator PAYNE â€ That is what he said.

Mr MacLean â€ No. We take advantage of the laws in each of the states in this country which allow people who have conscientious religious feelings not to vote if they wish not to.

Mr HOLLIS â€ Don't you feel that you have a moral responsibility to vote?

Mr MacLean â€ I will just make this point: please do not feel that because we do not vote that we do not believe in order and the law and the support of Caesar, as the Bible terms it. We have a moral obligation to be strictly obedient to the law of the land. We support it and we believe it is correct to do that. We have a God-given right to do it and we should do it. But as far as supporting one party against another, we have never done that.

Mr HOLLIS â€ It is an interesting point and I do not want to labour it, but many people would argue that thousands of people in Timor lost their lives because they took advantage of their democratic right to vote. But I do not want to pursue that.

Mr Toole â€ In answer to that questionâ€ just so that you get a bit more of an overall pictureâ€ the world over we do not vote. We are neutral politically the world over.

Mr HOLLIS â€ We do not accept that, but that isâ€

Mr Toole â€ No, I am not asking you to, but of course it is nice that we can share those differences at the table. That is what we are all about. On the other hand, we do not go to war either. Hitler tried to get people to say, 'Heil, Hitler.' As far as religious

organisations were concerned, we were basically the only religion in the whole of Germany that stood its ground. He put our members in concentration camps, tried to exterminate us, and thousands lost their lives, but they would not compromise because they felt that killing people was incompatible with being a Christian. The world over we are endeavouring to be neutral.

To take Mr MacLean's comment just a little further, we do conscientiously do what all governments would like their citizens to do—we pay their taxes and obey their laws. There is one exception: if the government asks us to do something that we feel God has commanded us not to do, or vice versa, then we feel we have a prior obligation to obey God. That is the only limit on our obedience to governments. If all subjects of Australia, for example, took that view it would be a very obedient country.

Senator PAYNE We would possibly be out of a job.

Mr HOLLIS Or it could go the other way. You make much of obeying the laws of the country, but it often is because of the laws of the country that people vote. If everyone decided not to vote, you may get laws in the country that you may have a little bit more difficulty invoking. I personally think it is a bit of a cop-out when people use these arguments about not voting.

CHAIR We are now into subjective judgment. We have asked the question and we have got the response, which is what we needed.

Senator PAYNE I have one final quick question. Do you run your own schools or do the children attend 'regular' government schools?

Mr MacLean No. Our children just go to the normal—principally government—schools in this country and throughout the world. We take advantage of the arrangement of education.

CHAIR Thank you for coming today. If there are any other matters that we have questions on afterwards, the secretary of the committee will write to you. We will send you a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which you can make corrections of fact.

Mr MacLean Thank you.

[3.01 p.m.]