



Folau faces the fight of his life

Rugby star asks public for \$3 million to back his fight against corporate tyranny

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Remember Australia's sporting legend, Israel Folau? He was banned from playing rugby in Australia because he had used an Instagram post to assert that homosexual acts are incompatible with Christian morality.

Folau has hit back with a claim for unfair dismissal. He is suing Rugby Australia for as much A\$10 million for lost income and potential earnings. His claim, based on Section 772 of the Fair Work Act, is that he was sacked because of his religious beliefs.

The latest news is a Go Fund Me appeal on the internet this week asking the public to donate \$3 million. "I have the fight of my life on my hands," Folau explains. So far, it's going well. After two days he has already raised \$330,000.

Three million dollars is a lot of money, but the funding campaign isn't greedy. It's just realistic. Folau has already spent \$100,000 fighting Rugby Australia in an internal tribunal. He says "Rugby Australia have already said that they will 'divert significant resources' to fight me in court. Even if I win, Rugby Australia can appeal. There is every chance that a prominent test case like this could take years and eventually end up in the High Court of Australia."

The response on social media was brutal. A rival Go Fund Me page was launched in the United Kingdom to combat Folau's alleged homophobia and transphobia. "Folau is no bastion of freedom of speech, but rather a hate preacher whose life goal is to torment queer kids," said @MaxLoomes on Twitter. This was one of the more courteous amongst the commentators.

A common complaint is that Folau is, or was, one of the highest-paid rugby players in the world. He is modestly wealthy. Why support him on Go Fund Me and not sick kids desperate for money to pay for treatment?

It's a balancing act. Curing sick kids is a worthy cause and Israel Folau will eventually find another job. But that's not the point. Folau has become an unlikely symbol of a growing intolerance in Australian society. The real questions are these: Are freedom of speech and religious freedom at risk? Are they worth fighting for? Are they worth funding?

To put these issues in perspective, let's start in Quebec, where they play ice hockey, not rugby. Last Sunday its legislature passed a bill forbidding public servants from wearing religious symbols at work. Sikhs cannot wear turbans; Jews cannot wear kippahs; Muslims cannot wear hijabs; Christians cannot wear crosses. Inspectors – dubbed a "secularism police force" by the Opposition – will snoop around workplaces to enforce compliance.

Freedom of religion is guaranteed under Canada's Charter of Rights, but the Quebec government has that under control. It has written into the new law a "notwithstanding clause," which enables provincial legislatures to override some constitutional rights.

Amazingly, in 2018 Canada was ranked fifth in a human freedom index created by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. It was just behind Australia. Obviously religious freedom is a blind spot for notionally democratic but politically correct governments.

So Australians can't dismiss fears that religious people of any persuasion (with possible the exception of secularism) will be sidelined or sacked. If it can happen in Canada, one of the world's most tolerant and open societies, it can happen here.

Folau was dismissed because he dared to question one of the dogmas of contemporary secularism: that homosexuality is a perfectly moral alternative to traditional marriage. His reasons are explicitly religious, as he explains in his video appeal for funds. But had he appealed to science or medicine the outcome would have been the same.

In 2012 then Prime Minister Julia Gillard cancelled an address to the Australian Christian Lobby because its director, Jim Wallace, asserted that smoking was healthier than the homosexual lifestyle. This could be true – there is data to support his claim. But Wallace was howled down.

It's time for a showdown over the right to question progressive dogmas in public life and in the workplace. Izzy Folau is an unlikely figure to be cast as David fighting a corporate Goliath. But so was Lech Walesa. And Erin Brockovich.

Win or lose in the courts, Folau's insistence on standing up for his beliefs is inspirational. He deserves to be supported.