

Faith
can
move
mountains



**Better
Balanced**
Futures

FAITH  **NSW**

OUR VISION

A strong, rich and diverse multicultural and multifaith Australia, where everyone is empowered and encouraged to freely pursue their own faith, beliefs, and values, in all sectors of society, without discrimination. We strive for a society that not only respects but celebrates faith, recognising its invaluable contribution in enriching our social fabric and strengthening our collective identity.



LEADERSHIP STATEMENT

From small beginnings, Better Balanced Futures has grown to be a think-tank of leaders representing each of the major faith communities of the people of NSW.

Our faith leaders work respectfully with one another, and with all levels of government and political leaders, on issues that matter to people of faith. Better Balanced Futures (BBF) emerged from the faith groups working together on special religious education in NSW government schools. During COVID, BBF was the go-to point for the government and health department to liaise with faith communities – and our strong advocacy played an important, recognised role in providing health and wellbeing to so many, as we wrestled with the pandemic.

It has been an immense honour and privilege to support our faith communities, and enhance Australia's inclusive, multicultural and multifaith society. We, as faith communities, have a lot to be proud of and celebrate, as we reflect on our impact, contribution to society, and the outcomes we have generated for the benefit of all Australians.

Better Balanced Futures (BBF) has united faith communities nationwide, partnering with the government to address the challenges facing communities and to help implement opportunities that provide positive and sustainable outcomes. The past year has seen record investment and funding, new legislation to make society safer, and a stronger voice for faith communities across Australia. BBF has been proud to lead and contribute to each of these outcomes.

Faith NSW, under the auspices of Better Balanced Futures, represents our ongoing engagement, advocacy, and commitment to providing opportunities for faith to flourish in NSW, recognising the invaluable contribution both personal faith, and the faith communities, make to our diverse multicultural society.

NSW is one of the strongest multicultural communities in the world, with census data showing that 60% of NSW people identify with a religion, with many new migrants also sharing a strong faith. We celebrate the rich contribution that multicultural and multifaith communities bring to NSW, coming together and learning to live harmoniously. BBF and Faith NSW seek to play an important role through collaborating with, representing, and bringing the different faith groups together. We provide a vehicle for positive change, harnessing opportunities, and addressing issues that affect society.

We are committed to ensuring all people of faith have the freedom to practice that faith, and live safely and securely, in our remarkable home of Australia – and would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our partners, supporters and communities for their tireless efforts.

We look forward to building on our successes, and continuing to work with the NSW government, its agencies and departments, NGOs, unions, associations, the media, and our ethnic, cultural and religious groups to create a more cohesive society that promotes better understanding, respect and acceptance, enriching our strong multicultural NSW.

Murray Norman, Darren Bark, Surinder Jain, Shadi Alsuleiman, Michael Stead
Better Balanced Futures Executive



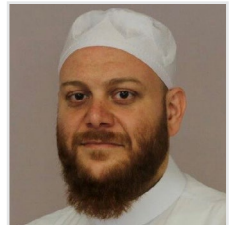
Murray Norman, Presbyterian
CEO, Better Balanced Futures



Darren Bark, Jewish
Co-chair, Better Balanced Futures



Surinder Jain, Hindu
Co-chair, Better Balanced Futures



Sheikh Shadi Alsuleiman, Muslim
Secretary, Better Balanced Futures



Bishop Michael Stead
Sydney Anglican
Treasurer, Better Balanced Futures



OUR PURPOSE

Better Balanced Futures and Faith NSW are committed to fostering robust, mutually respectful relationships between the faith communities and engaging with all levels of government, and each other, to address common causes and interests.

Through these collaborative efforts, we strive to build a more socially cohesive society that celebrates and upholds a rich freedom of religious belief and practice.



We recognise the beautiful diversity within the faith communities and acknowledge their invaluable contribution to the wellbeing of our multicultural and multifaith society.

We are committed to advocating for, and championing, the role that responsible faith communities play in contributing to the vibrant diversity that enriches NSW and Australia.





Heads of faith meeting with NSW Premier, The Hon. Chris Minns MP, and NSW Multicultural Minister, The Hon. Stephen Kamper MP.

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Heads of faith meeting with Attorney General, Michael Daley.

The past year has seen record investment and funding, new legislation to make society safer, and a stronger voice for faith communities in NSW and across Australia. Better Balanced Futures has been proud to lead and contribute to each of these outcomes.

SECURING SUPPORT & INVESTMENT

BBF spearheaded proposals, discussions, negotiations, and advocacy – uniting and working with the leaders of the faith communities – to secure commitments for an unprecedented amount of bipartisan support and investment focussed on a deeper understanding of culture, multiculturalism, and faith commitments. Commitments secured were in excess of \$90 million, working with state and federal governments.

Investment and support were provided for community activities, initiatives, and facilities. These included both new buildings, and upgrades to existing facilities, including: cultural hubs; educational, sports, and recreation facilities; wellbeing centres; cultural festivals and activities; museums; infrastructure upgrades; and security uplift.



ADVOCACY & REPRESENTATION

The importance of BBF has been demonstrated through our engagement with both sides of parliament and the cross-bench, particularly in the lead-up to the NSW state election. Through coming together, our collective representation as faith communities has meant that issues important to the richness of multicultural Australia have been heard, facilitating robust discussion that led to effective outcomes. Advocacy through BBF was outworked through an number of different mediums, submissions, parliamentary inquiries, responses to proposals, meetings with government leadership and MPs, departments, opposition and the cross-bench. We are elevating and ensuring that the faith communities' voice is understood and heard. Through working together as one, the resulting greater understanding of the opportunities, needs, and challenges facing the faith communities generates better outcomes for not just the faith communities themselves, but for everyone in our diversely multicultural NSW.



ESTABLISHING A NSW GOVERNMENT FAITH COUNCIL

In June 2022, National Census data was obtained and presented by BBF CEO Murray Norman, and expert social researcher Mark McCrindle, to both government and the opposition, for the purpose of advocating for and establishing a government faith council. The council was proposed and supported by all the major NSW faith communities, in order to allow faith communities to have a direct link to government, helping the NSW government strengthen engagement with faith communities. This proposal was accepted and the government faith council was announced by Mark Coure, Minister for Multiculturalism. When communities and government work closely together, it leads to better outcomes for everyone, and we look forward to excellent outcomes from this new advisory council.



Through working together as one, the resulting greater understanding of the opportunities, needs, and challenges facing the faith communities generates better outcomes for not just the faith communities themselves, but for everyone in our diversely multicultural NSW.

RELIGIOUS BULLYING

BBF and its members have been able to raise awareness of this important and current issue that people are currently facing in our schools and universities, which is having increased negative impact on society more broadly. Working at a high level, with our state leaders, BBF has lifted the profile of religious bullying, and through this awareness we've been able to gain a commitment, a memorandum of understanding, between the education department and the religious communities advisory council, as well as the government, to address this issue more broadly. The education department has set up a hotline, to enable reporting of religious bullying, and to also provide better processes for addressing these instances and complaints.

In 2023, representatives from BBF – Murray Norman, Darren Bark and Surinder Jain – spoke at the ANU Asian Religion Conference, and presented a paper on religious bullying. The team outlined the research findings, based on academic research conducted by two eminent professors, Suzanne Rutland and Zehavit Gross, and discussed current challenges faced by the faith communities surrounding the issue of religious bullying. Proposed solutions and processes were outlined, and an overview of the work completed - and ongoing - advocating with government.



GOVERNMENT CONSULTATION

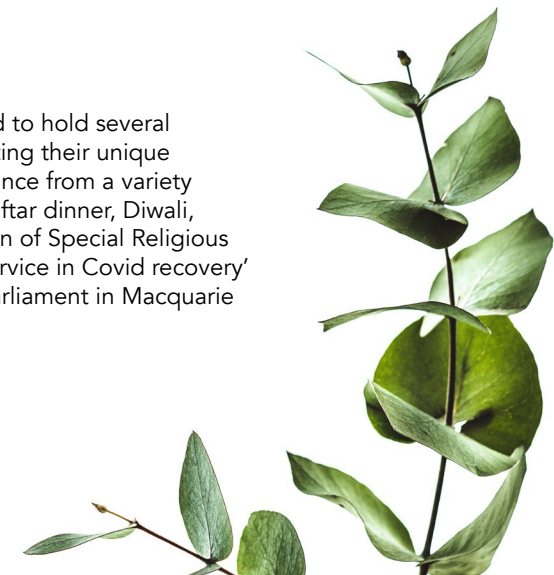
At the town hall meetings, hosted by BBF, a commitment was secured from Premier Chris Minns, promising religious and faith protections surrounding a suitable, balanced and considered conversion therapy bill.

In an ongoing manner, the unified faith leaders that form Better Balanced Futures will continue to work with government departments on legislation, to provide advice and consultation, ensuring that new initiatives are faith-informed and appropriate. Advocacy and consultation to-date has focussed on: implementation of assisted dying legislation; religious education; hate symbols; religious bullying; and conversion therapy.



CHAMPIONING MULTICULTURALISM

Faith groups involved with BBF were proud to hold several multicultural and interfaith events, celebrating their unique cultural festivals and holidays, with attendance from a variety of faith leaders. These events included an Iftar dinner, Diwali, and Chanukah – together with a celebration of Special Religious Education, and awards for 'Outstanding service in Covid recovery' for the religious communities, hosted at Parliament in Macquarie Street, Sydney.



LEGISLATION & GOVERNANCE

Religious vilification bill

BBF worked together with the faith communities to receive pre-election commitments and bipartisan support, for religious vilification legislation. "We committed, as an election promise, to introduce legislation making religious vilification unlawful within our first 100 days in office. We are here to make good on our promises and get things done by making this change to the Anti-Discrimination Act" - NSW Attorney General Michael Daley.

Prohibition on NAZI symbols display

BBF played a key role in facilitating the passage of the bill to ban the display of the symbols, and the bill was passed unanimously. BBF worked together with its members to provide input to a NSW parliamentary inquiry. A number of presentations were undertaken, to help ensure that this bill and its subsequent amendments protected all in NSW from the threat of right wing extremism and hate, and work was also undertaken at a federal level, to ensure national protections, including salutes and the trade of memorabilia.

Review of 83C

BBF secured a review into Section 83C legislation, to provide improvements to the governance arrangements for public funding to non-government schools. The review will focus on process improvements, provide greater clarity to non-government schools, and ensure strong oversight of government funding.



DIGITAL SRE ENROLLMENT FORM

BBF was able to secure bipartisan support for the inclusion of a Special Religious Education question, as part of the new digital enrolment form roll-out, enabling families to choose and easily enrol their children in Special Religious Education.

HEALTH & WELLBEING RESPONSES

NSW Health provided to BBF >70,000 Covid testing kits, for distribution to religious people who were frontline carers (SRE teachers, people delivering meals, and face-to-face ministry workers), meaning that BBF was one of the largest community providers of testing kits to frontline community workers in all of NSW.

BBF played a key role in conducting consultations with the various faith groups, for the purpose of generating guidelines for Covid recovery. These guidelines were produced in close partnership with NSW health, and adopted by the faith communities. Ongoing meetings and consultations were held with Kerry Chant, Premier Gladys Berejiklian, Health Minister Brad Hazard, Multicultural Minister Mark Coure, and infectious diseases expert, Associate Professor David Heslop.

BBF played a pivotal role in ensuring that communities across NSW were appropriately vaccinated and tested for Covid, to assist with the NSW state government's health response to keep us safe. This partnership facilitated the distribution of Covid testing kits (>70,000), encouraging distribution of vital information to protect people and their families, and distributing key information to leaders about these vital health measures – all leading to a substantial take-up rate after the campaign.

BBF also played a significant role in consulting with the government to develop an appropriate, safe re-opening roadmap for faith communities to operate within, in order for people to be able to practice their faith, including: facilitating and distributing guidelines; the practice of high holy days; and, concessions in order for religious services to be conducted. This resulted in a Covid enforcement order amendment, allowing safe practice of faith in the community.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

Faith Community Forums

BBF led Town Hall events with both the premier, and the leader of the opposition, ahead of the elections. Both of these events were run by BBF and live telecast on Sky – the first live election telecast by a national carrier presenting both sides of parliament engaging with the faith communities. Both sides gave pre-election commitments on: General Religious Education, Safety & Security, 283C, Religious Bullying, Religious Vilification, and Conversion Therapy. In addition, multiple town halls were run across a variety of electorates in NSW, to give opportunity for faith community members to put their questions directly to our leaders and candidates from the major parties and independents.

Leaders' Dinner

BBF was pleased to host the entire shadow cabinet (now cabinet) for NSW in 2022. At this dinner, Chris Minns gave a number of commitments to the faith communities and it was a great opportunity for his shadow cabinet and faith leaders to discuss the challenges and opportunity currently before us, and to engage with the multicultural faith communities.



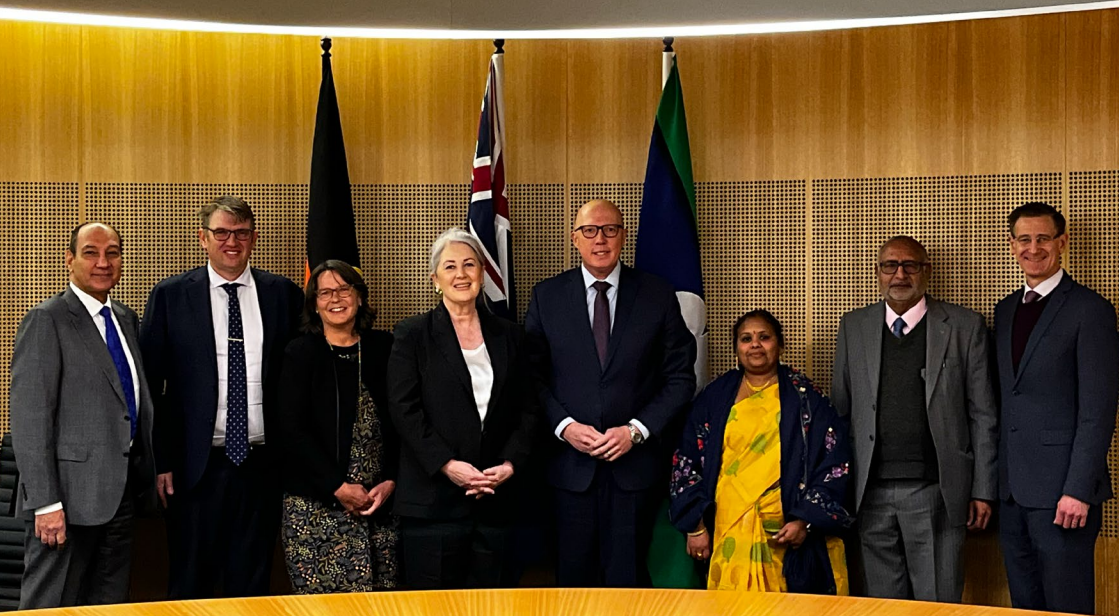
RECOGNITION

BBF hosted an event at parliament house with 400 people, to celebrate faith across NSW. Multicultural Minister Mark Coure distributed 20 community recognition awards, for providing outstanding leadership and service across COVID to protect us all. SRE awards were also given to 20 SRE teachers, by Education Minister Sarah Mitchell, to recognise wellbeing in the teaching of special religious education.

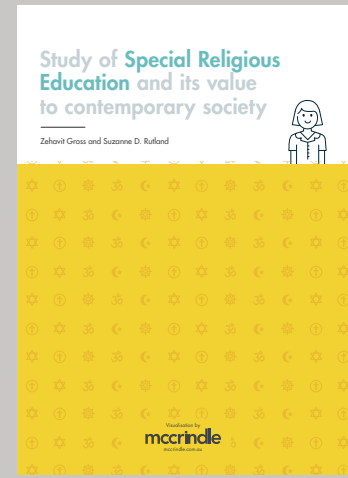
Suzanne Rutland and Zehavit Gross received a Premier's award for outstanding scientific contribution to religious education in Australia, both in theory and practice.

A Premier's award was also given to David Heslop for his contribution to supporting the faith communities during the Covid pandemic.





PUBLICATIONS:



CHURCHILL FELLOWSHIP REPORT - MURRAY NORMAN

An investigation into world's best practice for Religious Education in schools

Recently, Better Balanced Futures CEO Murray Norman travelled to seven different countries around the world, as part of a Churchill Fellowship scholarship tour: "I saw many amazing ways that faith groups are engaging with, and in, their society. There is much we can learn from these contexts when it comes to implementing, and benefiting from, the dual threads of General Religious Education and Special Religious Education, to increase thick multiculturalism, social cohesiveness, and wellbeing in NSW. However, none of these places seemed to have the same degree of multifaith collaboration, and government engagement, that we are experiencing in NSW through the faith communities working together. Most leaders I spoke with in these countries wanted to learn more about how they could replicate this in their own contexts".



Photography: Unsplash

