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24 August 2009

Mr Michael Barnett

By email: mikeybear69@gmail.com; michael@aleph.org.au

Dear Michael

I acknowledge receipt of a copy of your letter dated 22nd August 2009 sent to Mr Bob Stensholt, State MP for Burwood and copied also to Rob Hulls, State Attorney General, Michael Danby, Federal MP for Melbourne Ports, Sergeant Scott Davies, Victoria Police Gay and Lesbian Advisory Unit and Robert Goot, President ECAJ.

Let me say at the outset that I was both astonished and saddened by the contents of your letter.

As you know, I assumed the presidency of the JCCV in November 2008. I held no position on the JCCV Executive in May 1999 when the application by Aleph to become an affiliate of the JCCV was considered. Nevertheless, I do recall the media reports concerning the application and the insensitive, inflammatory, insulting and provocative remarks that were made by some who were opposing the application.

Since assuming the office of President, I have met with you on a couple of occasions and I have regarded those meetings as both cordial and productive. I have clarified to you that the JCCV constitution dictates that admission as an affiliate of the JCCV is governed by a vote of all affiliate organisations at a Plenum meeting and not by the Executive. I have also told you that I am committed to ensuring vilification of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people (Jews and non-Jews alike), and other minority groups is combated.

I have further explained to you that the Executive has discussed the issues relating to homophobic hate crimes and vilification and is committed to doing whatever we can to prevent vilification. As I have also stated to you on a number of occasions, the Executive is committed to including not only Aleph but other members of the GLBT community in our activities. It is for this reason that I sought and obtained from you the names and addresses of relevant individuals to add to our database to ensure they were invited to appropriate community events.

We last met to discuss these issues on 19 August 2009 on which date you provided me with a letter dated 19 August 2009 in which you stated that you *“are looking at a range of reforms that send a clear message that attacks against any Victorian based on these factors cannot be tolerated.”* As I told you during the meeting, there is an Executive meeting scheduled for 24 August 2009 during which the matter would be discussed at length.

As you are aware from our previous discussions, the Executive under my leadership is in the process of developing a strategy to deal with these issues. Part of the strategy, which is already in place, ensures representatives from Aleph and other GLBT organisations are invited to our events. In addition, our Executive Director, Geoffrey Zygier met with Liam Leonard, Research Fellow, Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS), La Trobe University on 14th August 2009 to discuss gay Jews’ participation in the community and ways to foster that participation. Among other things, Liam was asked to consider speaking at a plenum meeting. I have established and hope to maintain an open channel of communication with you so that we can discuss the best ways to respond to issues as and when they arise.

The JCCV has also been a strong advocate for the recently announced reforms to the Sentencing Act and, as you know has also been consistently pushing for the establishment of Hate Crimes Unit within Victoria Police. In our meetings with politicians, Victoria Police, other community organisations and the media we have consistently argued that these reforms should apply equally to crimes committed against individuals because of their sexual orientation.

Accordingly, for you to state in your letter that *“the JCCV...is...amongst the main protagonists of homophobic hate and intolerance in Victoria”* is not only preposterous and insulting, but blatantly wrong. Furthermore, the JCCV has never made any attempt to deny or trivialise your claims or discredit you and Aleph as you suggest. These claims are absurd. Indeed as I explained to you at our most recent meeting, the JCCV has not allowed *“the strong homophobic attitudes ... (which according to you are)... prevalent in the Jewish community to go unchallenged”* as you assert; I have raised this matter in several forums and will continue to do so.

Your claims are even more incomprehensible given that you did not even await the outcome of the Executive’s discussions before making them in your letter. The Executive’s discussion will unfortunately now be necessarily distracted from the real purpose as it considers your letter’s contents.

In the circumstances, I think it is appropriate that you retract the comments made about the JCCV and apologise for the hurt that has been caused. I ask that any such retraction and apology be provided to all addressees of your email.

More importantly, I again confirm with you that the JCCV is not, and has not been sitting idle in relation to these matters. We will remain proactive, but in a considered and

appropriate manner and not in a way that will bring adverse negative publicity and possibly increase vilification to any minority groups.

If you wish to discuss any of these issues, in the presence of any of the people to whom you sent your letter or otherwise, I am available to attend a meeting convened by you.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Searle', written in a cursive style.

John Searle
President

Cc: Mr Bob Stensholt MP
Mr Rob Hulls MP
Mr Michael Danby MP
Sergeant Scott Davis
Mr Robert Goot AM SC