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## **Burqa ban would breach religious rights – Alliance**

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A call by South Australian Senator, Cory Bernardi, to ban the wearing of burqas in Australia, is of great concern to a peak, non-profit, legal body, which promotes access to justice – the Australian Lawyers Alliance.

The Alliance believes such a move is a breach of religious freedom and is a prime example of why Australia needs better human rights protections.

“We have only just heard the federal government give its justification for not introducing a federal human rights Act, at this time, despite overwhelming public support to the contrary and here we have a prime example of why the opposite is true,” Alliance director, Greg Barns, said.

“The government has said that introducing a federal human rights Act would somehow divide the community when really, what it would do is unite it,” Mr Barns said.

He said everyone should have the right to express their religious beliefs, not just politicians who were known to parade their faith before the media to shore up votes with the politically dominant Christian culture.

Senator Cory Bernardi’s call to ban the burqa, following a robbery in a Sydney car park by a man wearing a burqa and sunglasses, was poorly considered and would only inflame religious divisions and created pockets of community fear.

“What’s next – the banning of sunglasses, scarves, bicycle helmets or the kaftan?” Mr Barns queried.

“Politicians should also be mindful that the Victorian *Racial and Tolerance Act* states: ‘A person must not, on the ground of the religious belief or activity of another person or class of persons, engage in conduct that incites hatred against, serious contempt for, or revulsion or severe ridicule of, that other person or class of persons.’

So such a move might be considered religious vilification if it went ahead,” he said.

“On his blog site, Mr Bernardi also commented that banning the burqa would strengthen women’s rights, but this is not necessarily the case. Some women may confine themselves more to their homes because they don’t want to go against the conventions of their religion,” Mr Barns said.

“This will only lead to more social exclusion for these women, rather than empowering them through social connections in their communities.

Like most things, the best way to improve the status and respect of women is through education and community engagement.”

***For more details contact: Australian Lawyers Alliance, public affairs manager, Mandy Wyer on 0418 270 656 or Alliance director, Greg Barns, 0419 691 846.***