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Andrew Thorburn says ousting as Essendon CEO over Christian faith 'dangerous'



Andrew Thorburn, pictured in 2019 after resigning as NAB CEO. Picture: Stuart McEvoy/The Australian
Source: News Corp Australia

Frank Chung from **News.com.au**

October 6th, 2022 8:53 am

Andrew Thorburn has warned that his ousting as Essendon CEO over his association with a conservative Christian church sets a “dangerous” precedent for religious freedom in Australia.

“Over the past 24 hours, I have received hundreds of messages of support and would like to thank all of those people, from a diversity



of faiths and beliefs, who have reached out to me,” Mr Thorburn said in a new statement on Wednesday.

“Concerningly, many messages expressed genuine worry for jobs and employment prospects due simply to faith. I believe that there are many Australians who fear the implications for their livelihoods, aspirations and participation in community life.

“It is troubling that faith or association with a church, mosque, synagogue or temple could render a person immediately unsuited to holding a particular role. That is a dangerous idea, one that will only reduce tolerance for others and diversity of thought and participation in our community and workplaces,” he said.

Grand Final

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*Odds are current as of 6th October 2022, 8:55am AEST

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“True tolerance, inclusion and diversity also includes people of faith.

“Freedoms of thought, conscience, religion and association are fundamental human rights, explicitly recognised in Victorian law in our Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities and Racial and Religious Tolerance Act.



Andrew Thorburn's resignation has sparked a firestorm. Picture: Stuart McEvoy/The Australian Source: News Corp Australia

“I genuinely and passionately believe people can hold different views on complex personal and moral matters while being able to live and work together respectfully and harmoniously. That is true inclusion whereby our communities are enriched by difference.”

The former [NAB boss](#) announced he was stepping down on Tuesday – one day after accepting the role – amid widespread backlash to the anti-homosexual and anti-abortion views of his church, City on a Hill, where he is chairman.

The controversy was sparked after a 2013 sermon from a pastor at the church resurfaced, titled, “Surviving Same Sex Attraction as a Christian”.

Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews – a paid-up Essendon club member – had earlier on Tuesday said that Bombers fans had another reason to be “somewhat disappointed” with the club, describing the church’s views as “absolutely appalling”, “hatred” and “bigotry”.

By Tuesday night, Mr Thorburn had officially [stepped down](#) from the Bombers to keep his role as chairman of City on a Hill.

“As soon as the comments relating to a 2013 sermon from a pastor at the City on a Hill church came to light this morning, we acted immediately to clarify the publicly espoused views on the organisation’s official website, which are in direct contradiction to our values as a club,” a club statement read.

“The Board made clear that, despite these not being views that Andrew Thorburn has expressed personally and that were also made prior to him taking up his role as chairman, he couldn’t continue to serve in his dual roles at the Essendon Football Club and as

chairman of City on a Hill.”



The City on a Hill church holds conservative views. Picture: Facebook

Source: Supplied

Mr Thorburn said a statement that it “became clear to me that my personal Christian faith is not tolerated or permitted in the public square, at least by some and perhaps by many”.

“Despite my own leadership record, within hours of my appointment being announced, the media and leaders of our community had spoken,” he said.

“They made it clear that my Christian faith and my association with a church are unacceptable in our culture if you wish to hold a leadership position in society. This grieves me greatly – though not just for myself, but for our society overall.”

Mr Thorburn's resignation has sparked a political firestorm over religious freedom, with faith leaders, conservatives leaders and media commentators decrying the move.

Federal opposition leader [Peter Dutton](#) has urged Labor to condemn Essendon for its "egregious attack on an individual because of his religious beliefs" amid renewed calls for religious freedom protections.

Mr Dutton warned of a return to the 1950s where "you had ads for jobs which expressly said, you know, 'Catholics and Jews need not apply'".

But Mr Andrews rejected any suggestion that people might need to hide their religious beliefs to take on a public role.

"No, they might want to have a think about whether they should be perhaps a bit more kind-hearted, a bit more inclusive," he told reporters on Wednesday.

"Aren't we all God's children? Like, seriously, seriously, there's no place for bigotry. There's no place for stigmatising people."

Peter Comensoli, the [Catholic Archbishop](#) of Melbourne, told *The Age* on Wednesday he was "appalled" at the message the move sent

to faith communities.

“It really concerns me deeply,” he said. “It is quite a bizarre reality we seem to have entered into where people are being judged unworthy to lead because of some of their basic Christian beliefs.”



Archbishop Peter Comensoli said he was 'appalled'. Picture: Mark Stewart

Source: News Corp Australia

Adel Salman, president of the Islamic Council of Victoria, said it showed organisations were increasingly sacrificing religious freedom.

“Someone should not be discriminated against and ostracised because of their religious views,” he told *The Age*. “I feel sorry for everyone involved and I just hope this doesn’t become a commonplace occurrence.”

Victorian [Opposition Leader](#) Matthew Guy also blasted the resignation as “ridiculous”. Speaking to 3AW on Wednesday morning, Mr Guy hit out at Mr Andrews for his role in Mr Thorburn’s decision.

“Football clubs can hire who they choose – I don’t see, if I was the Premier, why I would be telling people who they can hire and fire,” Mr Guy said.

“What, are we now banning people from going to church, banning people from going to a synagogue, banning people from going to a mosque? This is ridiculous.”

AFL chief executive Gillon McLachlan said he supported Mr Thorburn but backed Essendon’s position.

“I’ve spoken to Andrew. He’s a first-class person, I regard him as a friend, and he’s got great values,” he told reporters.

“I’m really clear that everyone is entitled to their beliefs and their religious beliefs. But at times those beliefs can intersect the values and culture of entities, and when you’ve been asked to lead one that seems to be at odds with the beliefs of another entity you’re chairing,

I think Andrew had to make a decision.

“And to be honest with you, that he went with his faith doesn’t surprise me because he’s a person of great conviction. In the end, I wasn’t surprised by the decision he made.”

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Bombers CEO resigns one day in! | 01:05

Fox Footy from **Fox Sports**

October 5th, 2022 10:31 pm

Victorian Opposition Leader Matthew Guy has labelled the circumstances behind Andrew Thorburn’s resignation as Essendon CEO “ridiculous”.

And federal Opposition Leader Peter Dutton believes he should be reappointed to the role.

[Thorburn resigned on Tuesday](#) after being told he could not hold the position while simultaneously being chair of controversial City on the Hill church, which has published anti-gay and anti-abortion views in the past.

Essendon president David Barham confirmed Thorburn was unwilling to resign from his position at the church, instead opting to quit as CEO of the Bombers.

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Blues get 'steal of trade period' | 02:59

Victorian premier [Daniel Andrews labelled some stances](#) held by Thorburn's church as "absolutely appalling", but said he would still renew his Essendon membership.

Andrews weighed in on the situation again following Thorburn's resignation from the Bombers.

"I lead the Pride March every year, I do that with a sense of genuine concern and support and commitment to make sure that every LGBTQIA+ Victorian is safe, respected and valued. If I'm to be criticised for that - then so be it.

"I'm much more focused on the fact that people are harming themselves and sometimes taking their own lives because of bigotry and prejudice.

"I had no involvement in him being appointed or his resignation."

Guy, speaking on 3AW, said Thorburn's resignation set a bad precedent.

"What are we now banning people from going to church, banning people from going to a synagogue, banning people from going to a mosque? This is ridiculous," he said.

"Football clubs can hire who they choose. I don't see, if I was the premier, why I would be telling people who they can hire and fire; why would you?"

Meanwhile Dutton, who falsely claimed Thorburn was fired, called for Thorburn to return.

Opposition Leader Peter Dutton speaking to the media about interest rates, IS fighters and brides returning to Australia at Pine Rivers Park, Strathpine. Picture: NewsWire / David Clark
Source: News Corp Australia

“We don’t tolerate discrimination against anybody on that basis,” Dutton told reporters on Wednesday.

“I’m very deeply concerned, about the development in relation to this Essendon situation and the dismissal, frankly, should be reversed and Mr Thorburn should be reappointed to his position.”

He added: “The views that have been expressed by a pastor at this church in relation to gay people, or to the issue of abortion – they’re an abomination and I condemn those points that have been made by that particular pastor.

“But the comments and the actions of Andrew Thorburn are completely distanced from that and the fact that an individual can be sacked from a position because of his religious belief doesn’t have any place in our country.”

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