Bishop brands Australian rugby player Israel Folau's religious comments 'hate speech'

ABC Coffs Coast  By Melissa Martin and Fiona Poole

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PHOTO: A decision has not yet been made on how Folau will be punished. (AAP: Dave Hunt)

An Anglican bishop has branded the religious statements of Australian rugby union player Israel Folau as hate speech.

The Bishop of Grafton, the Right Reverend Dr Murray Harvey, said free speech should not be used to vilify others.

"I think there's a difference between free speech and sometimes that can go over the borderline into hate speech," Bishop Harvey said.

"Certainly, he's got that right to free speech that we all have, but with rights come responsibilities."

Bishop Harvey's comments followed a hearing this week that found Folau committed a "high-level breach" of the professional players' code of conduct over controversial social media posts.

One of the posts proclaimed hell awaited "drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolaters".

Folau has not apologised or expressed any regrets for the posts, and was awaiting a decision on what his punishment for breaching the code would be.

When does free speech become hate speech?

Bishop Harvey did not have an opinion on how Folau should be punished by his sport, but said he wanted the 30-year-old to understand that words had consequences, sometimes dangerous ones, especially among young people who might be questioning their sexuality.

 RELATED STORY: Sponsor deserts Folau over his 'hell awaits you' Instagram post
 RELATED STORY: Israel Folau deserves shot at redemption, former Wallaby says

Key Points:
- Bishop believes Folau's statements on social media constitute hate speech
- A hearing has found Israel Folau committed a "high-level breach" of the professional players' code of conduct
- Grafton Bishop wants Folau to use his platform to send a positive message

"I'd like [Folau] to just to rethink some of his comments because when free speech starts to threaten other people or make other people feel unsafe or undervalued, then that kind of stuff becomes hate speech in my view," he said.

Bishop Harvey said while Folau was free to hold particular religious views, how he expressed them in public was another matter.

"Threatening people in this way cannot be disguised as protected religious activity — if it was then things like ethnic cleansing could be justified on religious grounds as having divine approval," Bishop Harvey said.

He believed Folau could achieve more for his faith by rethinking his choice of words, particularly in the public arena.

"I challenge him to think how he could be a really positive role model for the Christian faith and attract people to the Christian faith — if you want to do that I don't think the kinds of messages that he's been sending out is the place to start."

Topics: rugby-union, religion-and-beliefs, sport, anglicans, grafton-2460

Contact Melissa Martin
Folau blasts code of conduct process, signals legal battle

By Georgina Robinson
May 20, 2019 – 2.37pm

Sacked former Wallabies and Waratahs fullback Israel Folau has all but declared war on Rugby Australia, claiming he has no confidence of being treated fairly by the game's disciplinary processes.

After allowing the 72-hour appeal window to close on Monday, triggering the termination of his four-year multimillion-dollar contract, the dual international and three-time John Eales medallist reiterated he was considering all his options, including legal action.
"My decision not to commence Rugby Australia’s appeal process is in no way an acceptance of the judicial panel’s findings," he said.

"I simply do not have confidence in Rugby Australia’s ability to treat me fairly or lawfully throughout this process."

The Wallabies fullback was found to have committed a “high level” breach of Rugby Australia’s code of conduct after making anti-gay posts on social media last month, with a three-person independent panel, including two of the country’s top legal experts in workplace discrimination and employment law, recommending last Friday that his contract be torn up.

Under the code of conduct process, Folau had 72 hours to appeal against the decision, and that window closed at midday on Monday. RA announced his contract would be terminated.

Folau said he had been humbled by support from all corners after his sacking over anti-gay social media comments and still wanted to play rugby.

"The messages of support from fans, players, former rugby administrators and the public have been humbling," he said.

"I believe I still have a lot of rugby left in me and the potential impact of Rugby Australia’s decision on my reputation and my career is substantial.

"Ultimately, I need to do what is best for my family, my teammates and the fans, so I am considering all potential avenues open to me."

Folau’s only option now is to lodge a claim through the courts, which he is yet to do.

Meanwhile, news of his exit from the Australian game continued to reverberate around the world, with All Blacks coach Steve Hansen and high-profile Test referee Nigel Owens both weighing in.

With just four months until the World Cup kicks off in Japan, the New Zealand coach is ramping up preparations for a shortened Rugby Championship and two-Test Bledisloe Cup series in July.

Hansen said Folau’s absence would be felt by the Wallabies on the field.

"They will be different, like he’s such a great player and it’s disappointing for Australia that this whole thing has happened," Hansen said.
"It has and they'll want to move on from that.

"When you play Test matches you want to play against the best but they've got some quality players to play fullback. I'm sure they'll put players in with similar skill."

He also said the episode showed how careful players needed to be on social media.

"People can have their own beliefs, there's nothing wrong with that, as long as it's not damaging the beliefs of the team or the organisation that you work for," he said.

Earlier, Owens congratulated RA for their tough stance on Folau's comments. The Welsh referee, who was in charge of the 2015 World Cup final, is the international game’s first openly gay referee.

"It is an important message from the Australian Rugby Union, who I think have dealt with it properly in the only way that they could," he told BBC Radio 4.

"It is a clear message going out to people that there are consequences for expressing those beliefs, which are very, very hurtful and not acceptable in today's society."

The 47-year-old pleaded for a basis of mutual respect to be found.

"I respect [religious players'] religion, I respect their beliefs and all I would like to ask is that they respect other people's way of life and try to understand that it's not a choice," he told BBC Radio 4.

"I cannot choose my sexuality; I can choose what religion I follow, I can choose what kind of person I am - I'm a good person - what sport I play. There are many, many things I can choose in life but my sexuality is not one of them, that's what I'd like them to understand.

"It's a shame that it's gone to this and none of us should take any pleasure in the fact that somebody has lost his job and lost his career."
Georgina Robinson

Georgina Robinson is the chief rugby reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald.