# Government's census decision prompts outcry from Australian LGBTQ+ community



Crossbench MPs in Australia are demanding an urgent explanation from the Albanese government concerning the removal of sex and gender diversity topics from the upcoming census. The decision has sparked significant concern and disappointment amongst various groups, including the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

The exclusion, confirmed by Assistant Minister for the Treasury Andrew Leigh on Sunday, comes after more than a year since the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) expressed regret over the previous omission of the LGBTQ+ community from the census, causing distress among its members.

Allegra Spender, the independent MP for Wentworth, has voiced her dismay in a letter to Leigh, urging reversal of the decision. Spender highlighted that without comprehensive data on gender identity, sexual orientation, and sex characteristics, effective policy design and service provision in areas such as health and wellbeing cannot be achieved. “The proposed new topics seemed a ‘complete no-brainer’,” Spender later remarked to Guardian Australia.

Support for Spender’s stance is anticipated to come from fellow crossbenchers Monique Ryan, Kate Chaney, Sophie Scamps, and ACT independent senator David Pocock, who are expected to join her in a collective plea to Leigh.

The ABS embarked on consultation efforts in early 2023, finalising the new topics by December of the same year. Any adjustments to the census topics must be presented to Parliament and can be nullified by a vote in either house. In the Senate, the Labor Party would require backing from crossbenchers or the Coalition.

The ABS planned to test new questions addressing gender, sexual orientation, and sex characteristics, as well as questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities and relocation reasons over the past year. Other modifications were proposed to improve data collection on ancestry and religious affiliation.

On Monday, ABS Chief Statistician David Gruen announced the cancellation of plans to test these new topics following the federal government’s directive on Friday. Gruen stated, “The test would have included topics that the government has now decided will not be in the 2026 census. The ABS will adjust testing plans in light of this announcement, in order to best prepare us for a successful census – one that is safe, secure and easy to complete.”

Attempts to get a detailed rationale from Leigh’s office were unsuccessful.

Senator Pocock expressed confusion over the decision, citing the ABS’s extensive consultation efforts in formulating the new questions. “This decision exacerbates the hurt already felt by many LGBTI Australians following the last census, and I just don’t understand why the government would raise expectations only to let them down,” he said.

Sophie Scamps, a former general practitioner, emphasised the importance of accurate data for health and service planning, stating, “We would all benefit from more accurate data.”

Liz Allen, a demography expert at the Australian National University, warned that the exclusion of these questions leaves Australia “flying blind” concerning health and social outcomes for LGBTQ+ Australians. “We have moved forward miles ahead of the outdated constructs in the census, and so the census no longer reflects the way that we live our lives, who we are, how we live, the way we live our lives,” she observed.

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras voiced its disappointment, stressing that without comprehensive and inclusive data, the true diversity of the community remains unseen and marginalised, impeding efforts to address specific challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ Australians.

LGBTIQ+ Health Australia’s chief executive Nicky Bath called the absence of population-level data an ongoing issue, noting the government's decision as "unfathomable." Bath underscored, “We need an appropriate formal announcement with a clear rationale as to why this decision has been made.”

The Rainbow Labor's NSW chapter, a network of LGBTQ+ Labor members, urged the Albanese government to reconsider the decision in alignment with its federal platform. “We believe that there is nothing controversial about including LGBTIQ+ people in the census,” their statement read. “Excluding LGBTQI+ Australians from the national census data is demeaning and alienating,” they added, advocating for the promotion and celebration of national diversity, including the LGBTQI+ community.