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# All need to protect rights

## Opinion

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**S**ubmissions to the independent inquiry into human rights reflect broad community support for a federal law to protect human rights. Now it is time for the business community to weigh into the debate.

Business is likely to ask how a human rights act will affect it. The committee is considering a model under which obligations would apply almost exclusively to the public sector but, when a private company performs a service on behalf of government, it will likely be required to comply with any act.

Any compliance cost is likely to be substantially outweighed by the benefits to businesses affected, and to corporate Australia more generally. There are several reasons for this. The strongest is that the reform is likely to benefit business and the economy via savings from minimising human rights breaches and maximising economic participation.

Another benefit is in improving the overall regulatory framework, within which scrutiny of new bills for human-rights compliance will encourage more balanced lawmaking, obviating the need for frequent legislative change.

A human rights act would also provide opportunities for businesses to show their corporate social responsibility credentials. By volunteering to comply with human rights, as is possible under the ACT's Human Rights Act, a company could position itself favourably in the marketplace.

Research shows a direct correlation between a corporation's commitment to human rights and its long-term sustainability and financial success.

Telstra is one of the first major Australian companies to support publicly a human rights act. It sees benefits to itself and the community in strengthening human rights protection.

The Brennan Committee has reiterated that it wants to hear from all Australians. A human rights act presents genuine opportunities to business. Moreover, to ignore human rights is a business risk. Active engagement with the inquiry will allow business to help shape the debate and have its say.

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