

Secular schools of thought tainted

Jane Caro

Imagine if Bob Hawke, our only openly atheist prime minister, had allocated \$165 million for religious schools to have an atheist, agnostic or humanist counsellor, philosopher or ethicist to help them teach values and improve their pastoral care.

Or if publicly funded (and they all are) religious schools were compelled to provide two hours a week of atheist, agnostic or humanist instruction to their students. Parents could withdraw their children from such classes, but no other instruction could be offered to those students during those two hours. Excluded children would be banished to endless repeats of videos in the hall.

What would be the reaction if the reason given for the refusal to offer alternative instruction during the humanist two hours was that it was unfair competition because something more varied, academic or entertaining could encourage students to withdraw? If they wouldn't voluntarily listen to atheist philosophy, the argument went, they would just have to be bored.

What if programs offered in some religious schools - programs claiming to teach merely grooming, good manners and social skills - turned out to be run by atheist feminist and gay rights advocates whose motivation was to convert students to their secular ideals. How would society react?

There would be a hysterical outcry. Such a scandal could fell a government, or at least a minister, and no doubt many headmasters would lose their jobs. There would certainly be much outraged pontificating on the insidious nature of such proselytising on innocent and unsuspecting young people.

Yet this is precisely what is going on in our secular public schools. The only difference is it is not atheists, feminists or gay rights advocates who are seeking converts. It is, instead, those with a Christian agenda who are determined to insinuate their dogma into schools that are forbidden to privilege one brand of religion over another.

To be fair, there has been some unease about these developments. An audience guest on the ABC's discussion program *Q&A* (September 11), when asking the panel about the appropriateness of a religious program at the secular co-ed Toowoomba State High School, revealed that the program proposed girls follow different values from boys. The program was offered under the auspices of the Toowoomba City Church. Thanks to the questioner raising the issue, the Queensland Government has been shamed into doing something about it.

In NSW, at least, the school chaplaincy program in public schools has been a damp squib. Many schools have not used the program, preferring to remain true to their secular identity, and confident that their values and pastoral care need no help from the religious.

But reactions to this creeping religiosity have been muted. By and large, our governments have been at best supine and at worst compliant, terrified of the ire of religious voters. Many of those in the wider community who are not themselves

religious maintain a vague idea that fear of hell and desire for heaven are the only effective way to teach right from wrong. Religious instruction is often seen as a "good thing" no matter how deceptive, divisive or judgmental it may be.

Those who do the proselytising, of course, are unable to see what they are doing as wrong. No doubt they justify any sleight of hand or bending of the truth as a small price to pay to gather young souls for Jesus. For those of us, however, who have deliberately chosen secular education for our children, such a religious invasion of our public schools is unequivocally unwelcome.

Many parents who send their children to public schools are religious, as is their right. That is why public schools must be secular. It is obviously inappropriate to compel a child to attend a school that preaches a religion or philosophy different from the one taught at home. Public schools should respect the full range of beliefs, opinions and attitudes represented by their diverse student population, without taking sides. I am not claiming all public schools live up to this lofty position but it remains the ideal of secular, public schooling.

If religious instruction is to be offered, it must be voluntary, parents must be told what it will preach and who will preach it (and who is paying for it), and it must not prevent students who opt out from doing something constructive. No one in authority, no matter what their own beliefs, should ever sanction - or even just turn a blind eye to - conversion by stealth.

Jane Caro is the co-author of [The Stupid Country: How Australia Is Dismantling Public Education](#). This article appeared in the [Sydney Morning Herald](#) on 22 September 2008