

## **Australian values need to be taught, but not by chaplains**

*Ian Robinson, Australian Rationalist, May 2006*

The proposal to fund chaplains in public schools is another nail in the coffin of a viable free, compulsory and secular education in Australia.

This vital cornerstone of democracy has been progressively downgraded and undermined by the conservative government since it gained office in 1996.

Public education is no longer "free" because of the inadequacy of government funding: public schools must charge "voluntary contributions" and spend valuable time and energy in fund-raising.

Public education is no longer "compulsory": anyone with enough money can opt out of it without forfeiting access to more-than-generous government education grants.

Now Flinders MP Mr. Greg Hunt, supported by a couple of other liberal members, wants to make it no longer "secular".

It seems the proposal arose because a group of Christians associated with a small number of schools in Hunt's electorate on the Mornington Peninsula wanted to appoint chaplains to their schools, but were not able to raise the requisite money in the local "Christian" community. So they did what churches are frequently doing these days – they asked the government to subsidise them, thus further corroding the important democratic principle of church and state.

The justification for this use of taxpayers' money to subsidise superstition is that the schools need the "values" that the chaplains can provide.

If the liberal MPs together with Education Minister Julie Bishop and Prime Minister John Howard, who have both indicated their support, are so enamored of the church's values, why have they dismissed the same church's value-based advice on such matters as:

- the treatment of refugees?
- Aboriginal land rights?
- poverty?
- Industrial relations?
- The Iraq War?

It seems our students need such values, but Howard, Bishop and Hunt want nothing to do with them. "Do as I say, not as I do!"

On ABC Radio on 25 June 2006, Greg Hunt claimed that our values are based mainly on two great traditions; the Westminster system and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Predictably, he left out a very important third one – the Enlightenment. From which we get most of our secular values: freedom of speech, universal education, the scientific method, freedom from dogma, separation of the Church and State, tolerance – and of course the big three – liberte, egalite, fraternite.

The Judeo-Christian tradition, on the other hand, gave us exceptionalism and intolerance of others, and in the past has given significant support to slavery,

colonisation, the subjugation of women, and unjust right-wing and fascist dictators and oligarchies.

This is not just a biased atheist opinion. In a paper delivered to the inaugural Australasian Christian Legal Convention in 2001, Justice Michael Adams, a leading member of the Uniting Church, concluded:

*"I do not think it can be seriously contended that any substantial legal, social or political advance, even in the modern era, has been marked by a Christian consensus, with the possible exceptions in the USA of the extension of human rights to Afro-Americans in the 1960s and 1970s and the changes to the Australian Constitution concerning indigenous Australians in 1967."*

And more recently a study by Gregory Paul showed that among the developed countries, the pro-religious democracies consistently endured higher rates of societal dysfunction than the pro-secular ones:

*"In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, sexually transmitted disease infection rates, teen pregnancy and abortion."*

Do we really want chaplains to be teaching their values to our children?

The supporters of the proposal are quick to point out that the chaplains will not be providing much in the way of spiritual guidance, but will mainly provide "mentoring and personal development counselling and crisis management", and of course "values-based guidance".

If this is the lack that the appointment of chaplains is supposed to alleviate, it would appear that what we really need are not chaplains, but school social workers and psychologists, school nurses - and a mandatory course on ethics, values and comparative religion. There is no guarantee that a chaplain, however well-intentioned, will have all the skills for these diverse roles.

Mr. Hunt and Mr. Howard wave the word "values" around like a rallying banner, as though everyone knows what they mean. They cunningly don't say what specific "values" they are referring to. This is a very shrewd move because, as they well know, everyone will slot their own cherished values, however outrageous, into the government's "values" place-holder and be convinced that Howard and Hunt are battling for them.

Faced with a government unable to say sorry, prepared to go to an election without correcting a falsehood and into a war on the basis of a non-existent threat, adopting a punitive attitude to refugees and to the unemployed, and presiding over a major bifurcation of what was once a fairly egalitarian society into two widely separate groups – the well educated and the cheaply educated, the deserving rich and the undeserving poor – it is hard to fathom what values, if any, they actually hold.

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that a Howard government educational course on values would include such topics as: Turning a blind eye; Crossing to the other side of the street; Every man for himself; Kicking them while they're down; Advanced buck avoidance; and I'm All Right, Jack."

What the government should spend the millions of dollars a chaplaincy program would cost on, is introducing a course on ethics, values and comparative religion in to all secondary schools. This course could teach Australian values such as fairness, egalitarianism, mateship and concern for the under-dog. And family values such as unselfishness, compassion, tolerance, acceptance of difference, sharing of possessions, support for one another – and everyone contributing to the common good according to their ability.

Such a course would enable students to make informed ethical decisions about their own behaviour and their spiritual beliefs.

To invoke the government's own mantra, our children must be given that choice.

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