

Is Queensland the place where the 'Secular Experiment Failed'?

Hugh Wilson, Brisbane Institute, 01 July 2009

Religion has become a more prominent theme in Australian public life over recent years and has provoked a number of commentators to observe that we are imitating elements of the American political scene. In this article, Hugh Wilson argues that there is a long and continuing history of religious influence on public education in Queensland.

If Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his Education Minister Julia Gillard thought they were going to bring a warp-speed, technology-driven, post-modern (whatever that means) system of education to a nation fearful of 'book learning', then Rudd, at least, must have known it would never be let over the border into the Bible-belted Deep North to interfere with our nineteenth Century non-secular system of education.

Why would Queenslanders need to move beyond the thinking of the 1870s, when our mines are open, our farms produce food, and we have tourism and foreign students to add to our export driven economy?

But, 'don't you worry about that', as Joh and his ilk would have told the Moral Majority supporters fearful of a changed approach to schooling in the late 1960s, there is only one 'revolution' really going on in Queensland state schools, and it has nothing at all to do with Marx, Che - or the Enlightenment.

Or perhaps it does? Just as Cardinal George Pell insists that the 'secular experiment' has failed, and the Roman Catholic Way, like some ancient airport moving-footpath crossing the Empire for Caesar's legions to march along will bring us all closer to the 'real purpose' of life, if only we stepped on to it, so too are our evangelical Christian colleagues from Hillsong Church, the Assembly of God, the Australian Christian Lobby, Tim Costello's World Vision Baptists and the Scripture Union crew, all telling us that the end is nigh, and salvation lies in a school chaplain and a mob of Christian mentors roaming freely in state schools.

The recently-formed Australian Secular Lobby (ASL) met with the newly installed Education Minister, Mr. Geoff Wilson, and his acting Director-General of Education, at the Highfields Community Cabinet Meeting recently. We went to discuss the failure of Education Queensland to cater to non-Christian parents and students who, perhaps foolishly, are trusting the public education system to be 'secular'.

Bligh selected Highfields quite deliberately. This is Toowoomba North, where her previous Attorney General sat. Once elected, Kerry Shine decided to snub his electorate, who thought they were getting a seat at the Cabinet table, by refusing to carry on as the AG in Bligh's new government. Highfields was also the seat where Peter Beattie announced \$10 million of tax monies would be directed to pay for school chaplains, the pre-cursor to John Howard's national scheme.

At the meeting, the ASL spoke of the failure of Education Queensland (EQ) to observe the *Education Act* in relation to how students are placed into Religious Instruction (RI) classes. We raised the concerns of many parents who had emailed us with unbelievable tales of school principals imposing their own religious values in state schools, with prayers at assembly, cramming SU chaplains onto school communities with dodgy processes, forcing children into RI without parental permission, and we raised concerns over the official Bible lessons still available, at the principals' discretion, in Queensland state schools.

We were there mainly to ask him to consider replacing the word 'secular' in the *Education Act* in order to bring some order to state schools. In fact, we had a folder full of reasons for him to do just this in front of us, ready to hand to him before we left our all-too-short time slot.

Even as we were explaining about Bible lessons to the new Minister, he told us two amazing 'facts'. First, EQ taught 'comparative religion' in all their schools and second, there are no Bible lessons any more.

The acting Director-General confirmed to the Minister that he was correct on both counts. Amazing then, that we had just downloaded the Bible lesson section from the EQ web page, and the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) 'comparative religion' course available for all Y11-12 students, but only taught in a handful of private faith schools, and had them in the folder in front of us.

We also discussed, or tried to, the legitimacy of Hillsong programs in state schools, the need for unqualified Christian mentors allowed to roam free and operate one-on-one with 'at risk' students in state schools, as well as the role of Intelligent Design and Creationism in science classes in state schools, but all to no avail.

Geoff Wilson tells visitors to his electorate web site that he is a keen member of his local Church. The acting Director-General tells visitors to her EQ web site that she is from a 'good Catholic family'. Years ago, and not many years ago really, this information would be considered to be private and irrelevant for others to know.

Today, particularly in the area of public education, it helps to explain why EQ can see no harm with promoting Christianity above all other religions, or none, and why, from the Minister down to the classroom teacher in Prep who ignores EQ policy and force- feeds Noah's Ark tales as truths, there is a complete breakdown of rational, secular, thinking.

The ASL recently attended a conference on the future of education where the guest speaker was Geoffrey Robertson, QC. Robertson constantly referred to the beneficial secular nature of Australian public education, and how that had contributed to our national view of democracy.

At speech-end the ASL asked Robertson if he was aware that the Queensland public system had not been secular since a 1910 referendum to introduce Bible lessons and RI, and what did he think about that? After many qualifications and allowing for genuine religious education of a comparative nature, Robertson declared that Education Queensland was 'outdated' in wedging itself into supporting any particular religion.

Recently, the Minister responded to the ASL. The usual EQ letter, outlining all the policy school principals ignore, failing to mention anything about ID - Creationism in science - which EQ supports by the way, Bible lessons, Hillsong, unqualified Christian mentors, or much else we had discussed.

He did make a stand on one point, the nub of the problem really. Geoff Wilson informed the ASL that the government has no plans to reintroduce secular education to Queensland state schools.

Like Cardinal George Pell, Education Minister Geoff Wilson must believe that the 'secular experiment' is over, and Queensland is, once again, at the cutting-edge of public education.

After all, why else would Queensland be called 'the smart state'?

Hugh Wilson is researching the role of religion and faith in Australia's foreign policy development during the Howard era; and is a supporter of [The Fourth R](#), Queensland's only secular state school education evangelists, who are running the 'Let's get "secular" back in the Act' campaign. This paper was published by the Brisbane Institute on 1 July 2009 - http://www.brisinst.org.au/issue-details.php?article_id=521