

OPINION

Choice is all very well, but not at the expense of education

Iran Yusuf 25 March 2008

It was July 2007. I'd almost reached the end of an interview with feisty neo-conservative ex-Muslim Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the main attraction at the Sydney Writers Festival. I thought I'd throw in one last question to see how she was settling into her new life at the conservative American Enterprise Institute. I asked what she thought of the debate about teaching intelligent design (a more sophisticated version of creationism) in American schools.

Hirsi Ali's answer wasn't exactly diplomatic. People who teach creationism in schools should be imprisoned, she said.

It's unlikely this was what Professor Barry McGaw, a senior education adviser to the Rudd Government, had in mind when he suggested faith-based schools were leading to the development of more and more isolated sub-groups in our community.

The Age reported (February 25, 2008) that more than 200,000 children - almost 40 per cent of non-government school students - attended a religious school outside the main Catholic, Anglican and Uniting systems. Some are taught creationism as part of their science studies. A teacher at one small Christian school was quoted as saying that evolution was taught as a theory. This is exactly how I was taught about evolution by my year 9 science teacher at a Sydney Anglican school.

Another critic of faith-based schools, psychologist and educationist Louise Samway, believes faith-based schools are leading to a whole lot of disparate sub-groups that are suspicious of each other.

Such views are not limited to supposedly more secular professionals. In January 2005, I was in Melbourne at a workshop led by Swiss Muslim scholar Dr Tariq Ramadan. Now you'd expect that the grandson of the founder of the Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood), the Arab world's largest Islamist movement, would support Muslim minorities establishing their own schools.

Dr Ramadan, however, suggested that the whole idea of Islamic schools was problematic as it implied that secular schools were somehow less Islamic or even anti-Islamic. He asked participants to consider whether the long-term process of mainstreaming their faith in Australia was being helped or hindered by having their children attend schools open only to Muslims.

Dr Ramadan also insisted that learning mathematics and sciences were just as much a requirement of religion as learning how to read the Koran in Arabic.

If only his advice had been heeded by the management of Muslim Ladies College in Perth. The college was closed last year by the Education Department because its staff allegedly focused too heavily on teaching theology instead of the established curriculum.

According to a 2005 publication on Islamic schools prepared by the NSW branch of the Association of Independent Schools, about 10 per cent of children from Muslim families attend Islamic independent schools. One can only presume similar figures would also apply to children from other religious minorities.

But sometimes it isn't independent schools representing an unnecessary clash of values. In August 2005, as education minister responsible for the funding of independent schools, Dr Brendan Nelson blew his dog whistle hard by publicly lecturing Muslim independent schools to teach Australian values or "clear off".

Nelson reminded these schools they must display the "National Framework for Values Education, superimposed over which is a silhouette of Simpson and his Donkey, which is at the heart of our sense of national emerging identity". Nelson's advisers forgot to tell him Simpson was an illegal immigrant.

Yet Nelson had provided schools run by the Exclusive Brethren with exemptions from testing computer literacy for year 6 and year 10 students, despite this being made a condition of Federal Government independent school funding. Far from telling such schools to clear off, the then education minister provided them with \$6.6 million in funding.

Perhaps of greater concern than compliance with curriculum requirements is the management of some newly established independent schools. I have acted for a number of independent schools and one school principal in workplace relations disputes. These schools were established by well-meaning and sincere folk who wanted to provide children from their congregations with the best possible education. But good intentions alone are no substitute for expertise and experience in educational administration.

One school had a principal who had not even completed year 12, let alone possessed any qualifications or experience in running a school. This principal took his time paying the award entitlements of some of his staff though his own salary was always paid on time.

By contrast, another school of the same denomination and hardly three suburbs away was managed by a bursar who was a qualified chartered accountant and had taken a 40 per cent pay cut to leave his old job and devote himself full-time to the new school.

And what about the students attending such religious schools? How will they cope at university or in the job market where they will be faced with pluralism in religion, culture, ethnicity and sexual preference?

Mismanagement is not necessarily the norm for newly established schools, and not all students from these schools graduate as social misfits. But the reality is that the Commonwealth Government has thrown money at community-based schools managed by devout and sincere people with little or no educational credentials or experience. The community may be paying too high a price for a small minority of parents to exercise choice in their children's education.

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