

Howard's morality play

After attacking public schools for failing to teach morals, the Federal Government proposes to send in chaplains. Andrew Macintosh is sceptical.

The recently launched National School Chaplaincy Program (NSCP) is the latest strike by the Federal Government against the separation of church and state and further evidence of its desire to place ideological battles at the centre of school policies. The Government seems to be placing political objectives above the needs of students.

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The separation of church and state in Australia has never been complete. For example, religious institutions have enjoyed favourable tax treatment as charities and, since the 1960s, religious schools have been directly subsidised by the Federal Government. Despite this, there has generally been wide acceptance that the affairs of the state are best kept apart from religion.

At the Federal level, this sentiment is reflected in section 116 of the Constitution, which prohibits the Commonwealth from making 'any law establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion'.

This clause does not prevent the Federal Government from subsidising religious activities. However, the absence of a prohibition in the Constitution does not justify religious subsidies that are unrelated to matters of public interest.

John Stuart Mill once said that 'each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental or spiritual'. What he was suggesting is that there is a private sphere in which the state, and the general public, has no direct interest. This is because acts

taken within this sphere do not directly affect the wellbeing of others.

Where governments involve themselves in the private sphere, there is a risk of oppression – of the options open to the individual being constrained on the basis of choices made by others.

Banning acts that do not have a direct impact on the wellbeing of others constitutes the worst form of government intrusion in the private sphere. Yet subsidising religious activities contains similar dangers, particularly where the activities concern children and schools.

Under the NSCP, the Federal Government will offer grants of up to \$20,000 per school to assist with the employment of a chaplain, or more accurately, a religious instructor. The grants are available to schools that already have a chaplain and there is no sign the allocations will be means-tested or based on need.



The chaplains will not be counsellors in the traditional sense; their roles are to provide spiritual guidance and pastoral care. The only restrictions on who can be employed as a chaplain are that the person must be 'recognised through either formal academic qualifications or through formal endorsement by recognised, relevant religious authorities or groups'. The Government has emphasised that it will have the right

to veto grants where it deems proposed chaplains are unsuitable.

There are two main dangers here. Firstly, the Government is promoting religion and, in doing so, involving itself in the private sphere. The NSCP is not like normal school grant programs where the object is to promote education.

The fact that some schools that receive education grants provide religious instruction is usually a reflection of the legitimate choices of parents rather than choices made by the state. In the case of the NSCP, the government is crossing a divide by delving into private matters.

It is also an inefficient use of resources.

Secondly, not only is the Government promoting religion, it may also promote certain religions over others. The program allows the Government to choose who is an appropriate chaplain, meaning it can discriminate against religions and religious instructors.

Even if the Government does not intend to target certain religions or religious instructors, the nature of the program means that one religion is likely to be given preferential treatment at each school. The program allows for more than one chaplain to be employed at a school, but each school can only get a maximum of \$20,000 per year, making the employment of several chaplains from different religious persuasions unlikely.

Schools with chaplains may not be precluding students from choosing secular values or another religion, but they are pushing one choice ahead of the others. The end result may be to close student's minds to the choices that the school did not prefer.

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New Publications

M. Hamilton and C. Hamilton, *Baby Boomers and Retirement: Dreams, fears and anxieties*, Discussion Paper 89, September 2006

C. Hamilton and E. Rush, *The Attitudes of Australians to Happiness and Social Well-being*, Webpaper, September 2006

E. Rush and A. La Nauze, *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of children in Australia*, Discussion Paper 90, October 2006

A. Macintosh and C. Downie, *Wind Farms: The facts and the fallacies*, Discussion Paper 91, October 2006

A. Wilkie, *All Quiet in the Ranks: An exploration of dissent in Australia's security agencies*, Discussion Paper 92, November 2006

E. Rush and A. La Nauze, *Letting Children be Children: Stopping the sexualisation of children in Australia*, Discussion Paper 93, December 2006

Forthcoming Publications

C. Downie, *University Capture*

A. Macintosh, *The Siting of Nuclear Power Plants*

Playing Politics with national security. Continued from p. 3

So too the Government's pre-occupation with secondary problems, in particular terrorism, is distracting the security agencies from the more significant security challenges facing Australia, such as the proliferation of nuclear weapons and climate change.

The capacity of the agencies to deal with asymmetric threats like terrorism has been significantly undermined by the Government's manipulation of both the shape and nature of those agencies. The intelligence assessment agencies in particular need the brightest and most lateral thinkers, but such a situation is fundamentally at odds with the Howard Government's strong interest in recasting the agencies as even more conservative and politically reliable.

Neither the public nor the media can reverse the politicisation of the security agencies, in part because the public can only agitate about what it knows – assuming it cares enough to do so – while a not insignificant proportion of the media has proven to be lazy and compliant when it comes to security issues. ■

Have a Merry Christmas

Howard's morality play. Continued from p. 5

Liberal MPs such as Greg Hunt have argued that government schools are anti-religion, thereby providing a justification for the program. But secularism does not equate to atheism – it means leaving the individual to make choices free of state influence within the private sphere. Government schools should be neither for nor against religion; rather they should be respectful of the private choices of students and parents.

The problems with the NSCP are not confined to the fact that it breaches the separation of church and state. It is also an inefficient use of resources.

The evidence indicates that there is a large gap between Australia's highest and lowest performing students, which is lowering average academic outcomes. If this gap could be narrowed by raising the outcomes of the lowest performing students, it would reduce inequality and improve labour productivity.

To narrow the gap, governments need to invest more in disadvantaged schools. Government reports indicate that an additional several billion dollars are required each year to ensure all students at government schools can meet basic learning objectives.

When there is this level of need in government schools, there is no justification for directing scarce resources to fund religious activities, especially when the subsidies are most likely to be taken up by wealthy private religious schools.

If the Government is concerned about pastoral care and student support, it could invest the \$90 million that has been earmarked for the NSCP in a needs-based counselling program. This would ensure that counselling services are available to all students regardless of the school they attend or their religious beliefs, and that the services are provided by trained professionals. ■

Dramatic changes to Land Rights law. Continued from page 9

interest. In fact, the amendments could hinder economic development on Aboriginal land by diminishing the certainty and confidence that miners and others have in bodies representing Indigenous interests.

Traditional owners and their representative organisations in the NT will have their work cut out preserving their land and culture in this harsh new legal climate. Moreover, the parliamentary ambush on the Land Rights Act highlights the need for vigilance about what laws come next. ■