



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.
Volume 50 No. 8 September 2011

Small steps for secular schooling

The Victorian Education Department has changed guidelines for special religious instruction (SRI), so students who opt out must be given meaningful activities. The Department has also changed the consent forms that ask whether parents want their child to participate in religious instruction. Previously, if a response was not received within 14 days, a child would automatically be put in the SRI class. The new form no longer expressly states this.

HSV Committee considers these changes are small steps for secular schooling.

Humanists favour well funded, high-quality, secular education. While we see a place within school curricula for education about world views and religious beliefs, we have for years objected strongly to special religious instruction (SRI) being given time within the normal school day. This has permitted representatives from religious groups to come into state schools and give lessons in their faith.

Only a little over 40% of Victorian primary state school students receive SRI. Of those students 96% are given 'CRE' provided by Access ministries, representing 12 Christian denominations. Not only is this access permitted, but secular education and the separation of church and state is further undermined by government grants, federal and state, to assist Access ministries in its work of SRI and chaplaincy training. To date no other religion or secular group is offered any government funds.

Parents can request that their children not attend SRI classes, this is called opting out. Unfortunately the opted out children can be discriminated against, by being required to sit at the back of the class, or in a corridor or outside the principal office during SRI lessons. Anecdotally it is known that some opted out students have been actively blocked from doing assignment work or other activities of educational value.

Two years ago an Ethics Course compiled by HSV's Dr Harry Gardner was rejected as an alternative to SRI by the Minister of Education, Bronwyn Pike. Flowing from this rejection HSV initiated a case of discrimination on behalf of parents of students who were opted-out of SRI classes. As we saw it, opted-out students were doubly discriminated against. They were not permitted to be involved in an alternative Ethics Course and they couldn't always do other useful schoolwork in SRI time.

Three parents, including HSV member Sophie Aitken, are involved in the case before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT), being handled by a legal team from the firm Holding and Redlich. The two small changes in operation of SRI programs, mentioned above, came just before the first hearing in early August. The next hearing is scheduled for December.

Rosslyn Ives, editor

Print Post Approved PP 335708/00019

HSV Monthly
Public Lecture
THURSDAY
22 September
7.30 for 8.00 pm

Meeting Room
Balwyn Library

336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn
(Melway map ref. 46 E8)



Pamela Curr

(Campaigns Co-ordinator,
Asylum Seekers Resource
Centre) on

**'Has empathy died?
Don't humans count
any more?'**

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Submissions and letters to public bodies

1. A Joint Select Committee was established to investigate Australia's Immigration Detention Network. We made the following main points to the terms of reference.

- Humanists call for a faster and humane assessment of health and refugee status, all applications to be processed within 3 months of arrival, released into community-based accommodation.
- We note that most are genuine refugees later released into our society. Prolonged incarceration damages their health and welfare. We regret that last year's offers to house refugees in church-owned, vacant properties were not accepted. Community-based housing is less expensive, meets international human-rights principles, promotes education and integration, alleviates racist and xenophobic fears, and enriches local economies.
- Outsourcing the management of detention centres to private providers has been shown to be inappropriate. These guards are trained to deal with criminals and not with vulnerable, traumatised people. "Commercial, in confidence" obscures transparency of their operations.
- Riots, suicides and self-harm are obvious signs of total despair of people who feel condemned, ignored and without hope. Mental-health strategies should be implemented for the inmates and staff who find their task distressing. Media reports report stress among staff who deal with suicides and self-harm on a daily basis.
- Security assessment must be unbiased and adhere to human-rights standards. We do not believe ASIO is adhering to these principles. Regrettably some asylum seekers have been returned to their place of origin where they have been executed or 'disappeared'.
- We call for public education campaign regarding refugees and Australia's humanitarian obligations.
- The recent 'Malaysian solution' compounds our inhumane treatment of the refugees. That country is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and is known for its harsh ways with refugees.

Geoff Allshorn & Halina Strnad

2. A letter was sent to Heritage Victoria supporting the retention of Brennan Hall, 29 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy, as an example of early freethought Science Hall.

HSV members celebrated the centenary of this former Science Hall opening on 12 May 1989, with a visit during the day and a dinner the same evening. A brief account by Nigel Sinnott of this building appeared in *AH* No. 103, 'Freethought Halls in Australia and New Zealand.'

Rosslyn Ives

3. HSV responded to an invitation from a representative of the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) to study a draft curriculum entitled *Ethical Behaviour*, prepared by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) for the national curriculum. In all I there were three sessions with school principals in Melbourne University and philosophy teachers and also a personal meeting with the VCAA representative at the VCAA building itself.

In addition the ACARA draft was circulated and six members made comments, which were combined in final submission. Hence HSV has been well and truly consulted on Ethics.

The ACARA draft on the internet and comprised (a) a Conceptual Statement with references to text books, (b) a 'Continuum' with relevant definitions and headings and (c) a tabulated summary under those headings for grades to Years 2, 6 and 10, respectively. It is still not clear whether the course material will be made a single topic throughout each year or whether the content ideas will be interspersed within other topics, which is probably the better approach.

The HSV members found much to praise in the ACARA draft. Its tone was convincingly secular and several of the authorities cited were Australian, of whom HSV itself has extensively used Philip Cam in his *Philosophy with Young Children – a Classroom Handbook* and Peter Singer in his *Companion to Ethics*. The draft endorsed the aim to 'assist children to become confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens through fostering the development of personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others and the capacity to act with moral and ethical integrity.' The main HSV reservations were (a) in the title, *Ethical Behaviour*, for which we preferred either 'Ethics' or 'Ethical Understanding' as being less normative, and (b) the sources were confined to western philosophers and we recommended inclusion of eastern philosophers.

Harry Gardner

Letter to editor

Change is inevitable

The intellectual community of Australia is still firmly trapped in its colonial mind-set. Its members seem to be content to be hacks or the political equivalent of munitions workers. But then what would one expect of a country allegedly described by a famous Australian as "the arse end of the world"?

Change has occurred and will continue to happen but its final outcome is unknown. Things will not go back to the way they were. This fact of change is proving very difficult for some people to accept.

Peter Sherbrooke, Clayton

Living fearful lives: the price of individual freedom and relational poverty

HSV Public Lecture on 28 July, Balwyn Library. Given by Jacques Boulet
from Borderlands Co-operative.

Report by Howard Hodgens

Jacques Boulet began his working life as a Catholic priest and social worker in the slums of Brussels and progressed to becoming an activist involved with social research backed by his world-wide experience. His experience in Belgian Congo from 1966–69 in restorative work was pivotal to his development. His mother died while in the Congo and his native friends asked whether they could cry with him. Through this experience he rediscovered what it meant to be part of an extended family and community. This, despite what Belgians as colonists had done to the Congolese.

He spent some years in Germany and in 1996 he went to US for 5 years to study for a doctorate in Social Psychology. On coming to Australia he spent some years on the staff of several tertiary institutes. Frustrated by the conservative approach of these institutes he formed the Borderlands Co-operative. Drawing on his academic knowledge and years of experience, has helped him establish and produce a publication, *New Community Quarterly*.

Jacques found that there appeared to be only a small body of thoughtful material about change: there were divisions between social and individual, politics and religion in the state of democracy. As Erich Fromm in his book *Fear of Freedom* (1942) found, there was a space between psychology and humanity. Man was seeking security but in doing so was destroying himself. Human preoccupation with independence left individuals alone and isolated. Freedom and material gain became an end in itself. The Protestant ethic was with god not with community. Dan Gardner in his book, *Risk: The science of Politics and Fear* (2008), detected some of the chief causes were – lack of neurological ability to control threats, the media's role in promoting risk and the 'merchants of fear' politically and economically – like Bush in the 9/11 scare boosting insurance.

These dysfunctional features of modern societies led to the lost relationship capacity. Added to this, technology has outstripped our power to control it. Signs of social disorder have appeared: in work situations– isolation, loneliness, fear of risk, and of doing the wrong thing; discontinuity in work many having 7-8 jobs; and marriage breakdown – one in three households in the US have only one parent. He quotes the writer and novelist David Malouf as saying life may have gone on too long so it becomes death in life. Other Australians who have expressed similar views are social commentator Hugh Mackay, cartoonist Michael Leunig and vocal group The Seekers. Jacques does not think Humanism has improved on Christianity.

Factors which contribute to loneliness are these:

- Ego – we have become absorbed in ourselves.
- We suffer from being anthropocentric – believing ourselves to be the centre of the universe.
- Cultural simplicity instead of accepting uncertainty and impermanence.
- Economic fixation and pursuit of the work ethic.
- Political representation *not* participation.
- Primacy of the individual rather than of the community, i.e. negative human rights.
- Masculine bias – male-dominated institutions.
- Western ways exported to the rest of the world, e.g. British Empire dominance.
- Systematic removal of ideals – justification is that relationships are contractual and thus lacking balance between the interest of the community and the individual.
- Glorification of the free market.

He concluded with four changes necessary to restore real balance in relationships:

a) spending more time together, b) sharing spaces, c) reciprocity – thanking you for the gift of sharing and d) sacrifice or selflessness. We need to actively contribute to the whole community.

Echoing Hillary Clinton he summed up his philosophy as, "For a child to grow you need a village". His Borderlands co-operative has created Co-Housing as an initiative, where people learn to share living together.

Embiggen Books Opens in Melbourne

Warren Bonett who organised and edited *The Australian Book of Atheism*, Scribe 2010, has open a bookshop in the heart of Melbourne, 197 Little Lonsdale St., opposite the Wheeler Centre on south side of State Library building.

Embiggen Books stocks a wide range of books on science, skepticism, philosophy and art.

Tasmanian Humanist brunch

Tasmanian members, visiting Humanists, and any interested friends are invited to join us at 1100 at 'Jampacked' (Henry Jones' Art Hotel Atrium) on 16 October 2011. Please reply by 8 October, so we know what size of table to book.

We are planning to advertise our presence a little and have set up a group email address for interested parties to use. humaniststas@gmail.com

Humanist ethics possible in Victorian State schools

On Monday 8 August the Victorian Civil & Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) attempted to mediate between three particularly aggrieved families and the Education Department (DEECD), but the case was not settled. However just prior to mediation the legalistic Departmental Guidelines, which had been described by the Minister as the ‘law’, were withdrawn and replaced by *Additional advice* to school principals. In particular there was a change of policy in the 6th Advice requiring that opted-out children now be given meaningful work instead of merely time-filling or wasting activities. This fulfilled the promise made in the 2005 White Paper on special religious instruction, but which had been voided following a petition organised by ACCESS ministries, of which ACCESS is quite proud. (See ACCESS SRI fact sheet, Aug. 2011.)

Wonderfully, on Wednesday 24 August the DEECD bravely distanced itself further from its mentor, ACCESS ministries, and modified the *Additional advice* to read “ensure that students who do not attend SRI are appropriately supervised by teachers, and engaged in positive, independent learning such as self-study, *including* revision or other activities, for example, community service, peer mentoring, *participation in clubs or instruction in areas outside the core curriculum*” (emphasis mine – HG).

This was a further huge shift in DEECD policy. Under pressure of the prospective VCAT hearing on 12 December 2011 one may guess that the Department’s own lawyers have told it that it couldn’t win with the inbuilt discrimination of the SRI system. But the *Additional advice* should surely be tested as soon as possible, before ACCESS ministries and the Australian Christian Lobby once again get control of the DEECD’s policy.

In my opinion, HSV is fighting religious intolerance here in Victoria as strong as that described by Leo Igwe in Africa and that evangelicals of the Billy Graham type are now part of ACCESS ministries and dictating its campaign.

Harry Gardner

Understanding how we cause climate change, in a nutshell.

The belief systems which dominate present-day society are not the various religions and atheism, but case-and-effect reason (science) and free-market philosophy (institutionalised greed). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the debate on climate change.

Most of us perceive a problem. Is the answer for reason to fold its cards and admit greed wins? Is it to applaud sleight of hand, which does not really address the problem?

Tom Mole will expand on these ideas at the discussion on Sunday 11 September.

World Humanist Congress, Oslo, 2011, ‘Humanism and Peace’

12 August. *Plenary sessions*

Welcome: Sonja Eggerickx (president, IHEU); Åse Kleveland (president, Norwegian Humanist Association)

Ensuring a peaceful future through evolving our understandings of security and ourselves: Erik Assadourian (Worldwatch Institute)

Minute of silence in remembrance of Norwegian victims of massacre

Sarabande and Praeludium by Edvard Grieg: Oslo Camerata Orchestra

Greetings from the Norwegian Government: H.R.H. Crown Prince Haakon

Peace – from lack of realism to rational conflict resolution: Johan Galtung (Transcend)

Killing the innocent: Humanism and the Just War tradition: Richard Norman (British Humanist Association)

13 August. *Parallel sessions*

The role of supranational organizations. Sophie in ’t Veld (European Parliament); Heiner Bielefeldt (UN Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief); David Pollock (European Humanist Federation); Leo Igwe (IHEU, Africa); Linda Polman (journalist)

Lifistance and peace. Greg M. Epstein (Humanist Chaplain, Harvard University); Jeremy Gunn (ex American Civil Liberties Union); Lars Gule (Norwegian Humanist Association); Vikas Gora (Rotary Peace Fellow); Gulalai Ismail (Aware Girls); Pierre Roy (Libre Pensée); Jason Torpy (Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers)

Our emotional life and the role of ceremonies. Wendy James (anthropologist); Tove Beate Pedersen (Norwegian Psychological Association); Pierre Galand (Centre d’Action Laïque); Naomi Phillips (British Humanist Association)

Z? P.Z. Myers (Pharyngula); Judith Hand (peace ethnologist); panel discussion chaired by Erik Tunstad (science journalist)

Step by step and peace by piece – methods of Humanism and peace. International Humanist & Ethical Youth Organization group work

14 August. *Plenary sessions*

Break dance: Floorknights Crew

Organized civil society in promoting just global governance – the example of fighting international corruption: Peter Eigen (Transparency International)

My struggle for equality: Taslima Nasrin (author)

Roundtable debate on Humanists and military service: Kjetil Wiedswang, Pierre Roy, Lars Gule, Baard Thalberg, Jason Torpy

Close

Dalit village project

Humanists are urged to contribute to IHEU's Dalit village project in India. Dalits or untouchables are by birth outside the caste system. As such they are heavily discriminated against in respect of forms of employment, other than cleaners and rubbish collectors, education, health and other government-provided services. The negative consequences of one's caste continues to exert discriminatory effects in other countries. See article about a UK case below

CAHS is supporting this IHEU project. Humanists who want to contribute should send donations to: CAHS, GPO Box 1555, Melbourne Vic 3001.

Why is the Government dragging its feet over caste discrimination?

The UK Government appears to be very slowly edging towards outlawing discrimination on the grounds of caste.

Home Secretary Theresa May is reported to be closely following a legal case involving an Indian couple who have become the first people to claim caste discrimination in Britain. She is reportedly considering whether to add caste discrimination to existing safeguards for race, sex, religion and sexuality in equality law.

The couple, who met at a legal firm in Coventry, claim they were forced from their jobs after they married. Vijay Begraj is a Dalit (formerly known as the Untouchables) and Amardeep Begraj is a Jat, a higher caste. Amardeep was warned by colleagues not to marry Vijay because his caste are 'different creatures'. She also claimed that her workload increased and secretarial support was reduced 'as a punishment', and she was paid less than colleagues. He was sacked last year.

In 2010 the NSS worked closely with Hindu campaigners and peers, especially Honorary Associate Lord Avebury, to successfully lobby for enabling legislation in the Equality Bill to permit the outlawing of discrimination on the grounds of caste. Under the measure a Minister can initiate an order at any time without further primary legislation.

The NSS has been critical of both the Government and the Equality & Human Rights Commission for not taking action over caste discrimination despite research showing it is a real problem in the UK.

A government-sponsored report found evidence of bullying, problems finding work or being promoted, problems with access to social services and getting places in schools. However, some Hindu organisations have denied that it is a problem.

NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood commented:

'The blight of caste discrimination, under which millions in India are regarded as Untouchable, has spread to this country virtually unnoticed.

The report clearly demonstrated the need for protection and Parliament has given the Government the authority so it is absolutely disgraceful that it has not been enabled.'

See also: [The secret scandal of Britain's caste system](#)
Extract from the National Secular Society's *Newsline*, 26 August 2011:
www.secularism.org.uk

Surveying the world by phone

Last month a world-wide survey was conducted by the UN. The only question asked was:

"Would you please give your honest opinion about solutions to the food shortage in the rest of the world?"

The survey was a huge failure because of the following:

1. In Israel, Washington and London they didn't know what "honest" meant.
2. In Europe they didn't know what "shortage" meant.
3. In Africa they didn't know what "food" meant.
4. In China they didn't know what "opinion" meant.
5. In the Middle East they didn't know what "solution" meant.
6. In South America they didn't know what "please" meant.
7. In the USA they didn't know what "the rest of the world" meant.
8. In Australasia they hung up as soon as they heard the Indian accent.

Receive your *VH* by E-mail

If you wish to receive your *VH* (except in months when mailed with *AH*) by E-mail, please advise both Dan Kerr victorianhumanist@gmail.com and Rosslyn Ives rosslyn@netspace.net.au.

The members' E-mail list that is being compiled will also be used to advise members of coming HSV and related activities.

Think Inc. Conference

18 September 2011

Speakers include: Neil deGrasse Tyson, Christopher Hitchens, Tim Flannery, Michael Shermer, Shane Koyczan, Josh Thomas, Fr. Bob Maguire, and others.

Australian Humanists are official promotional partners of Think Inc. Conference.

For bookings and more information go to [http:// www.thinkinc.org.au/edm](http://www.thinkinc.org.au/edm)

Have your say

Contributions to *VH* newsletter, most welcome. Send to *VH* editor c/o PO Box 1555, Melbourne Vic 3001 or email rosslyn@netspace.net.au