

Submission
No 209

**INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS
CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011**

Name: Mr Nicholas Moll
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The Director,
General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
Sydney, NSW, 2000.

19th of February, 2012.

Parliamentary Enquiry into the *Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011*

Dear Sir or Madam,

I write with concerns about the recent introduction in public schools of Ethics Classes at the same time as Special Religious Education (SRE).

My concern is ultimately summarized in the claim that: Ethics Classes being held at the same time as SRE is an expression of an aggressively secularist movement/philosophy and will serve to marginalize SRE, which has been a stalwart of NSW public schooling (as protected by legislation) since the churches handed over schooling to the care of the state.

Broad philosophical concerns

The aggressively secularist philosophy to which I refer holds such views as: that religion should be kept private, and has no place in schooling, public policy or the like. It ultimately seeks freedom *from* religion as opposed to freedom *of* religion. Proponents of this view arrogantly and falsely claim an higher ground; suggesting that their views are impartial because they are devoid of any religious reasoning.

Whilst people can be in favour of Ethics Classes being offered at the same time as SRE without such an aggressively secularist agenda, the move to have these classes (at the same time as SRE) generally suggests a movement in the direction of this kind of secular dogmatism. This is evidenced by the failure to accurately acknowledge the nature of SRE and in turn the mistaken setting of Ethics Classes as a comparable alternative to SRE.

Referring to this philosophical issue, whilst arguably an exercise in speculation, is relevant because this Ethics Class issue ultimately touches the issue of the place of religion in society. In brief, freedom *of* religion is the position that has historical precedent within Australia, and in turn, is best for society. Such a position allows and

benefits from public expression of and indeed public instruction in religion. Movement towards a coercive and aggressive secularism (however slow this movement is) is a frightening prospect.

As such, the problem with Ethics Classes is that they are offered at the same time as SRE. Offering them at another time, would not facilitate this aggressively secularist agenda.

Specific concerns

Ethics Classes should not be offered at the same time as SRE, because they are not a comparison of like with like. SRE is aimed at teaching the particular doctrines of the religion in view. This will have ethical implications, but cannot be summarized as training in ethics. Ethics Classes should not be offered at the same time as SRE.

Further, an offering of Ethics Classes is not aligned with the original intention or historical precedent of SRE. Further again, Ethics Classes being at the same time as SRE, means that children attending SRE miss out on a different subject that they should be able to attend. Of course, education about different ethical systems and how ethics takes place is valuable for all children, irrespective of their and their parents' religious persuasion.

Whilst the system affords choice to parents about what their children attend, the choice offered is no longer a fair one between different religious persuasions. It is now biased choice, with what seems to be a secularist agenda weighting the bias. Parents have been forced to choose between religious instruction and instruction in ethics – a choice they should not be forced to make.

Over time, in alignment with the increasingly secularist mainstream, this choice is likely to result in less children attending SRE, which will have its own set of societal costs.

Of course, those parents who don't wish their children to be given religious instruction should be allowed to absent their children. And of course, those children should be given constructive activities to do. (Workbooks and a syllabus for these children providing general instruction about the world's religions has been provided in the past and seems like a sensible choice.) Irrespective of what the non-SRE children are given, the suggestion that they may be wasting time or set useless tasks should not have bearing upon the nature of what is offered within the allocated SRE allotment.

The content of the Ethics Classes is a topic worthy of extended consideration and one which we are ill-equipped to make extended comment on. It should be noted though that, in the name of educational integrity, any assertions about moral rights and wrongs within these classes, should be accompanied by a disclosure of the assumptions that such assertions are based upon.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of these suggestions.

Yours faithfully,

Nicholas Moll