

**Submission
No 93**

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

Name: Dr Klaas Woldring

Date received: 6/02/2012

Submission re Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010

Marie Ficarra MLC,
Committee Chair.

I make this submission as a retired Associate Professor in Politics and Management of Southern Cross University, and editor of and contributor to an academic text on business ethics. The title of reader is ***Business Ethics in Australia and New Zealand – Essays and Cases***, Nelson ITP, 1996. I have also co-authored an article on HRM and ethics that appeared in the ***Journal on International HRM*** published by Cardiff University, in the late 1990s. The concern in the business world about a large variety of corrupt practices and the growing tendency to reward executives with outrageous financial rewards prompted these publications. In the process the nature of ethics and origin of ethics teaching in educational institutions were examined at length. Much of business ethics teaching has a predominantly secular foundation although some business ethicists, both theorists and practitioners, do have a religious foundation and values on which they build.

If one conclusion of my research and writings springs to mind it is the need for **early** educational emphasis on ethics with business students at university for it to be effective. This should not be taught in later study years, and not as an optional unit. It should never be omitted in a Bachelor's program – but it often is. Indeed, it should be taught as a compulsory first year course. Similar conclusions were reached by several foreign academics in this field, including Harvard University. We also found that the teaching of ethics at primary and secondary schools in many western countries left very much to be desired. It was sometimes entirely overlooked. **For that reason alone ethics teaching at primary level is to be greatly commended; and a structured program is required.** It should not be left to the individual teacher to devote some time to this subject, depending on how important this individual it may find, or on the time he or she may be able to find to devote to it – which may be little or none given the curriculum pressures. That's why I totally concur with what I read in literature produced by the Primary Ethics group.

The goal of Primary Ethics is to provide children with a lifelong capacity to make ethical judgments and to act reasonably and responsibly.

The second general conclusion that flowed from my research is that it is wrong to argue that secular ethics is necessarily a by-product from Christian dogma teaching or any kind of religion that has ethical behaviour as part of its basic religious doctrines, but without the acknowledgement of the existence of Deity. Similarly humanism is not a child of Christianity. For many it is a reaction against even a rejection of Christianity. The philosophy of ethical behaviour and the teaching thereof also goes back much further than the commencement of religious doctrines that we are familiar with and that still guide some people's lives. The decline of the attraction of or need for religion in the Western world, for various reasons, including of course the

disenchantment with the shocking behaviour of some Priests in relation to their wards, suggest that for many parents alternatives to scripture education in schools is long overdue. The traditional reliance on scripture teachings as an adequate and/or at least acceptable source for ethical education has been misguided and often quite pig-headed to put it bluntly. The Primary Ethics group, in my view, is well on track to overcome this inadequacy without damage to those who definitely still prefer scripture classes. Again I quote from their literature:

"In our first year of operations and with extremely limited resources, we have already recruited, accredited and trained over 400 skilled and highly motivated volunteers who are serving in over 150 schools. The level of community engagement and the 3500 students that have elected to join our classes provides us with a great sense of validation of our program. It should also be noted that this has been done with minimal adverse effect on the provision of classes in Special Religious Education - with the vast majority of students attending ethics classes being drawn from amongst those who had previously elected not to attend scripture.

In 2010 the Department of Education completed a thorough trial of ethics in schools. This trial involved ten schools, leading Australian academics and a high degree of community consultation. Out of 750 submissions made, 730 (97%) were in support of the introduction of ethics. As a result of this, on 1 December 2010 the NSW Education Act 1990 was amended to give students the legal right to attend philosophical ethics classes".

So, we now may well ask, and I certainly do, why this Review now? It turns out that political motivations have played a quite questionable role here; while the art of politics often is determined by what is possible surely there are clear limits here. Is it possible that the Premier will renege on his pre-election promise? Could he be that unethical?

The Federation of Parents and Citizens' has urged Premier Barry O'Farrell, in the strongest possible terms, to abide by his election commitment in ensuring the ethics classes remain an option for students not participating in Special Religious Education (SRE).

Late last year reports circulated that the Premier had done a deal with the Rev. Fred Nile to remove or present ethics at a different time to SRE. The Federation's President Helen Walton described these reports as "extremely offensive to public school parents".

She also said "ethics classes provided parents a choice in how their child was meaningfully engaged when other students were participating in SRE. Any change to the ethics class removes this choice."

The Premier's position on ethics classes at the time of the last State election was very clear – that ethics class legislation would not be removed. Further, the Premier clearly stated that he would not engage in deals with the minor parties in the Upper House should they have the balance of power. This exactly what has occurred.

The course organiser, Dr Simon Longstaff, Executive Director of the St James Ethics Centre, has called on Premier Barry O'Farrell to keep his promise to NSW voters and retain ethics classes in as a complement to scripture in NSW public schools. He said:

"The Premier promised voters his government would retain the option of ethics classes during scripture time. If Mr O'Farrell caves into Mr Nile's demands he will invite a backlash from all those who care more for children than politics"

"There is a legitimate expectation from parents that Mr O'Farrell will do what is right for the children of NSW, not what is politically convenient for his government. We know that the Premier has to negotiate with Reverend Nile - but there are some things that should never be traded; most particularly the interests of children.

"Backing down to the minority voice of Fred Nile will anger the parents of the 2,700 children now involved in 180 ethics classes at 128 primary schools across the state - and people of good will across the State.

"Premier O'Farrell should provide a lesson in ethics and reject the proposition that 'might is right' and that the ends justify the means," Dr Longstaff said.

The comments by Mike Carlton in his weekly *SMH* column (19.11.2011) about the stacking of a committee of the Legislative Council charged with assessing the value of ethics classes in schools are very worrying indeed. It is quite obvious from Carlton's explanation that this assessment can hardly be an impartial one. I checked the composition on the parliamentary website. The General Purpose Standing Committee N.2 comprises a majority of conservative MPs, including the Liberal right winger David Clarke, Marie Ficarra (Opus Dei member), Fred Nile's colleague Paul Green, Sarah Mitchell (NP), Jan Barham (Greens), and ALP members Shaquette Moselmane and Helen Westwood. It will examine the objectives and effectiveness of the classes, the curriculum and whether the legislation that allows them to be taught as an alternative to special religious education should be repealed.

The need for this Inquiry is altogether highly questionable. The committee has been given this task at the initiative of the Rev. Fred Nile who has expressed the most bizarre objections against ethics classes. The overwhelming majority of parents support ethics classes. Major churches have come out in support of the classes, as proposed and prepared. There has been ample public debate about this issue. The classes have been well received. The Premier made an electoral commitment that the ethics classes would continue. If the classes are discontinued that would strengthen the belief of the electorate that most politicians do need ethics classes even more than school children do. Many voters no doubt had a similar strong impression by the end of NSW Labor's term in office when politician after politician was shown the door by the outgoing Premier Kristina Keneally. The huge loss of the ALP was largely due to the smell of corruption and misbehavior by a large number of ALP politicians abusing the trust of the electors. If NSW continues along these

lines the case for the total renewal of the political, electoral and federal systems presents itself even more forcefully. The people want and deserve ethical politicians.

Klaas Woldring,

A/Prof Klaas Woldring is editor of and contributor to ***Business Ethics in Australian and New Zealand, Essays and Cases*** - Nelson ITP 1996.