

**Submission
No 178**

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

Name: Mrs Monique Boutet

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Submission to the General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 of the New South Wales Government
Re: Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011

Dated: 20 February 2012

As a concerned parent and an ethics class facilitator, I am strongly in favour of the ethics classes currently provided by Primary Ethics to NSW primary schools, and therefore I am equally strongly opposed to the Repeal Bill.

The Terms of Reference for this inquiry do not mention his criticisms of the classes, but it is well known that the inquiry originated with Mr Fred Nile. According to Hansard, in Parliament on 5 August 2011 Mr Nile said: *“I believe that that course does not teach children right from wrong but promotes the secular humanist relative philosophy where there are no absolutes, such as “You shall not murder”, “You shall not lie” and “You shall not steal”. Even Dr Knight, who conducted the review for the Labor Government, said that the course should not be called an ethics course; rather, it should be called a philosophical relativism course, and I agree. Relativism is the basis of secular humanism. I believe, and I know other members will disagree, that that is the philosophy we saw during World War II with the Nazis and communists.”*

There are gross distortions in these statements. For example, Mr Nile says: *“Relativism is the basis of secular humanism. I believe...that that is the philosophy we saw during World War II with the Nazis and communists”*. The very first principle of the Amsterdam Declaration 2002, from the World Humanist Congress 2002, reads: *“**Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.”*

That does not sound like relativism to me, let alone Nazism. (And surely we should not be enlisting the horrors of Nazism to score points in debate).

Mr Nile claims that “true ethics” must come from Jesus Christ. (Hansard, 5 August 2011 – Mr Nile: *“I agree with the need for the teaching of true ethics in schools, colleges and universities in New South Wales. Those ethics should be based on history’s greatest teacher of ethics, the Lord Jesus Christ, who presented Almighty God’s moral ethics for the human race beginning with the Ten Commandments....”*). At the risk of being labelled ‘relativist’, I allow that Mr Nile is entitled to his opinion. But many disagree, including many Christians. For example, the Christian theologian Vincent MacNamara wrote this in his book *The Call To Be Human: Making Sense of Morality* (Veritas, 2010, pp. 36-37): *“The authority of morality, then, is the authority of the truth. It is independent of church, state and judiciary. It may be important, indeed indispensable, to the life of some of these institutions. Some of them may think they are good at it or know a lot about it. They may demand it from their members or subordinates. But they do not make morality and cannot make things right or wrong. They have to find out what is right or wrong and that can be a long and complex task: what is right or wrong, as we said, is not deduced from some abstract or eternal principle in the sky; it is discovered by reflecting on what it is actually like to be a*

human being among other human beings. Things are never right or wrong because somebody says so, not even God, but because of the way we are in the world, because of our human social condition.”

“...and that can be a long and complex task...”. Perhaps many of us wish it could be boiled down to 10 commandments, but in these days of stem cell research, global warming, factory farming, in vitro fertilisation, global financial crises and so on, unfortunately it is just not that simple. Morality is complex. Acknowledging that complexity, being willing to discuss it, trying to improve our ability to understand and apply it - this does not make us relativists, it makes us realists.

Mr Nile claims that Dr Sue Knight, who conducted the 2010 review of the pilot ethics classes, “*said that the course should not be called an ethics course; rather, it should be called a philosophical relativism course, and I agree*”. Dr Knight did not make any such statement in her Final Report. She did say: “*It is recommended that in the event of a wider roll-out of an ethics-based complement to Special Religious Education: a. the ethics-based complement to scripture be described as a ‘course in Philosophical Ethics’, or equivalently, a ‘Moral Philosophy-based course’, or given some such name in order to make clear the boundaries of its content...*” (NSW Ethics Course Trial: Final Report, p. 19). Mr Nile appears to believe that any ethics course based on a philosophical approach is inherently relativist. Dr Knight clearly rebuts this: “*The field of Moral Philosophy has a two and a half thousand-year history and a logically rigorous methodology; the ethical inquiry approach has been employed widely for three decades by philosophers concerned to introduce philosophy (including ethics and logic) to the broader community. These are philosophers who decry relativism.*” (Final Report, p. 55).

Dr Knight did raise some concerns that the pilot curriculum and classes did not allow sufficient time and opportunity for evaluation of reasons offered in justification of particular positions during the classes. She made certain recommendations in this regard, including that each topic be taught over two or more consecutive weeks, and that the training of volunteers be modified to enhance their skills in encouraging students to reflect upon and evaluate their beliefs and reasons. Primary Ethics is in a better position than me to address this, but as a facilitator it is apparent to me that those recommendations have been taken into account in the development of the current ethics class program.

The Repeal Bill is based on a profound misunderstanding of, and rigid bias against, philosophical ethics. It is also apparently driven by a desire to eliminate a perceived competitor to scripture classes, even though ethics classes were only ever intended to provide an option for children in non-scripture classes, who were spending up to an hour a week at school in non-educational activities. Surely a much, much sounder basis would be needed to deny New South Wales children this valuable educational opportunity.

Monique Boutet