

**Submission
No 183**

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

Organisation: Humanist Society of NSW

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Submission to the GPSC No.2 in respect of the Inquiry into the Education Amendment (Ethics Classes Repeal) Bill 2011.

Humanist Society of NSW February 2012

We write with respect to item a, in terms of the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to "Special Education in Ethics", here called "**SEE**", being conducted in State schools. Special Education in Ethics is an alternative (and concurrent) for Special Religious Education, also known as "Scripture", here called "**SRE**".

First, we comment on some related matters leading to the objectives and effectiveness of the SEE. We consider objectives to not only be those stated in the report by Dr. Knight, but also those apparent from Parliamentary Debate.

1. The objective of choice

One objective was to provide parents with choice, so their children could do something meaningful during the SRE hour. Fred Nile and others agree parents have a right to stop their children from attending SRE (also known as "scripture" instruction). In addition, however, parents **also** have the right to have their children participate in 'meaningful options' (to use the language of the Federation of P&C organisations in NSW) - including SEE.

2. The objective of improving students' awareness of ethics

Another objective was improving "students' understanding of and skills in ethical decision making" - the objective the course sees for itself - the report by Dr. Knight shows it to have been effective.

There have been claims that the report shows the SEE to be fundamentally flawed. However, an objective reading of the report shows it to be supportive of the thrust of SEE, with any problems being ones to overcome as improvements to the course, together with some recommendations on how to implement it on a wider scale.

In no sense are these problems "show stoppers". Critics expect an unrealistic degree of perfection, and try to claim that the smallest problem makes the whole project worthless. They commit the "Nirvana fallacy" - where the perfect becomes the enemy of the good.

Our view of the implementation and the curriculum is that it is fine and appropriate; this is informed by the experiences of some of our members who have been teachers in the program.

3. Criticisms and their motivation

Many criticisms of the course seem to originate in the idea that scripture education is worthwhile, and nothing else can compare.

This is something that many parents fundamentally disagree with. They see ethics education as something which will help their child's development of an ethical framework where children can think through things for themselves, rather than be "educated" about a supernaturally revealed ethical system.

This is supported by the large number of positive submissions in reply, the satisfaction noted by parents and children completing the courses, and the enthusiasm which they have felt about their children attending these courses. It is also worth noting that the P&C federation supported the implementation of the course, and this group is representative of many parents who have children in the public school system.

The driving principle of the Christian religious lobby is that scripture should have a monopoly on worthwhile ethical development for children and that only scripture / religious education (SRE) can teach children a sense of "right and wrong"; various misleading pictures have been drawn about what the ethics in SEE is about. Nile also claims that Jesus being saviour is significant; we see this as a claim that will only have traction with believers, as compared to many non-believers who do not see this as relevant in their child's development of ethical awareness.

We believe that these specious criticisms and distortions have been made by Fred Nile and others for ideological reasons, rather than coming from a point of view which is genuine and cogent.

In our view the SEE has been given an extensive trial, thoroughly analysed and found quite acceptable, after which it was fully adopted. Nile now wants to roll back this initiative, seeking to make use of a different balance of political forces.

4. Humanism and the non-religious tradition

As Humanists, we believe that the non-religious ethical tradition **does** inform us about what is right and wrong. Ethics is not about receiving commandments from God - it is rather thinking about ethical affairs - which can be done independently of religion.

The Ten Commandments are not unique to Jews and Christians; similar sentiments have been derived from many different sources, including secular ones.

It is entirely wrong for Christians and other believers to say they have a monopoly on ethics and that this monopoly lets them dictate what should then be taught in schools.

At the same time, as Humanists we endorse the right of individuals to have religious belief, and are happy if people want to inform their own lives with it. We have problems when people support laws which have a religious origin but apply to everyone, including non-believers.

We have much in the way of common cause with religious believers when it comes to social justice, refugees and war. We have even more in common with denominations at the progressive end of the spectrum - such as the Uniting Church, the Unitarians and the Society of Friends (Quakers).

5. Distorted views of what "Ethics Teaching" means

Fred Nile claims that the "ethics" taught is not what most parents view as ethics - Mr. Nile seems to claim that the "ethics" most parents want is about "knowing right from wrong".

Given the intensity of debate, we are sure parents know exactly what the "ethics" in SEE covers. They see that SEE **does** help children to tell the difference between right and wrong, and see ethics in contemporary terms rather than in terms of Nile's narrow usage.

6. Ethics teaching is "educationally justifiable"

We completely disagree with the claim SEE is not "educationally justifiable". We could equally ask whether scripture is "educationally justifiable". One claim might be made that scripture (SRE) has a long history, but that is no "justification". We could point to the fact that non-religious ethics has a history going back to the ancient Greeks. Perhaps scripture (SRE) is not **meant** to be education - we'd entirely agree. But just as religious parents might want their children to "develop" through exposure to SRE, we see that other parents might want their children to develop through exposure to SEE.

Regardless, if parents and children see it as a more worthwhile than SRE, why should we prevent parents' right to pursue what they see as a better alternative ?

7. The validity of the Ethics Teaching

It has been suggested that those responsible for SEE need to consult "curriculum experts". However, this is not an initiative which is being forced on anyone. There is no need to find time in an already crowded curriculum for a new subject. It is an optional alternative, and an alternative to time being wasted, and does not replace any existing teaching. We are enabling choice - and we see no reason for the content to be scrutinised as though it were dangerous, and as though we were sacrificing something else to make it possible.

We further note that the curriculum has been developed with the assistance of Dr. Phillip Cam, a longtime researcher in and advocate for "Philosophy for Children". He certainly satisfies the criteria for being a "curriculum expert" - such people have indeed been consulted.

In fact, the ethics in scripture has a non-religious origin. The ethics of Jesus and Paul are known to be developed from that of Epicurus, a Greek philosopher who predated Jesus. Early Christians looked to the Greek philosophers, and sought a way to reconcile their thought, which existed before Jesus, to that of Jesus. It was some time later - in the fourth Century - that Augustine made progress here, and in the 13th Century Thomas Aquinas developed this further. We also note that according to Tamas Pataki, our legal system originates not in the bible, but rather in pre-Christian Rome.

Scripture has not been without its controversy. Several parents have been disconcerted to find their children bringing home concerns about the fate of their soul - and very anxious about it - when this was never what they had intended. Their desire was to go along with things so the child would not be marginalised - little realising the emotional turmoil in store for them.

In contrast, philosophical education - including the non-religious ethics discussed here - has been seen to reduce bullying at the Buranda State School in Queensland (see <http://education.qld.gov.au/publication/schoolsandparents/2007/issue1-8philosophy.html>).

8. Religions in perspective - their inherent worth

Religions are not the bastions of moral virtue they are claimed to be. Fred Nile has previously tried to make some dubious connections to Nazism, but he forgets the fact that Vatican made a concordat with the Nazis to allow Catholic Education in Schools, and that Gestapo troops has an insignia bearing "God With Us", or the fact that the Vatican organised a "ratline" after the Second World War to get Nazi war criminals out of Europe.

There have also been claims about connections with Stalinism. In fact Stalin embraced the ideas of Trofim Lysenko, an anti-evolutionist, with much famine resulting. While notionally non-religious, he drew a lot of inspiration from the power and ceremony of the Russian Orthodox Church. His social ideas were not in fact informed by Humanism or Atheism at all.

Nile has also tried to claim that the ethics in SEE is "situation ethics"; this is not the intention at all. In fact, "Situation ethics" was a Christian ethical theory developed in the 1960s by the then Episcopalian priest Joseph Fletcher, where killing the enemy could be justified in war, amongst other consequences.

The point here is that Ethics Education as currently employed is a worthy pursuit with a long and worthwhile heritage going back to ancient Greek philosophy. Scripture has no monopoly on worthwhile behaviour; in fact there is much more dubious history in the Christian Church than there is in any Governments which embraced the non-religious Greek ethical tradition.

However, we recognise that Christians can derive worthwhile sentiments from the Bible and their religion. To the extent these sentiments are valid, they owe as much to tradition, context and the people doing the interpretation as the Bible itself. We recognise that believers can do good things and lead good lives which are informed by their religious belief. While possible, however, this does not represent a monopoly, nor is it a justification to hold scripture teaching (SRE) above non-religious ethics education (SEE).

9. Forces in favour of SEE

Fred Nile has claimed that this education is part of some agenda to "force" "Secular Humanist Ethics" onto school children. In fact, these ethical principles stand separate to the Humanist movement. We follow those principles, and endorse them. However, they are equally taught by many philosophers in universities throughout the world who have no formal connection to the Humanist movement, and fit into the broader discipline of philosophical ethics, as noted by the report.

Similarly, while we support SEE, we have had no involvement in the preparation of the syllabus. The number of parents advocating the course far exceeds our membership, as does the membership of the P&C. Clearly, there is a large number of parents who see the worth of this sort of ethics education but have no particular connection to Humanism or the Humanist movement.

It is our feeling that many parents who are not believers have sent children to scripture (SRE) in the view that it might help them develop ethical thought, or perhaps so their children would not feel different.

The push for SEE is not a push by a "minority group"; that would mean the Federation of P&C organisations is somehow a "minority group". This group has sought quality education for students in the public education system for decades; to claim it is a "minority group" is quite ridiculous.

10. The historical claim

Fred Nile has tried to claim that an original arrangement by Henry Parkes was a worthwhile agreement made for very good reasons by Parkes, and one we should still consider binding.

Regardless of past arrangements, the important thing is to make an arrangement which is good for us all **now**. We should not be burdened by the past.

The past arrangement was a compromise. Schools of different denominations were being set up in competition with each other, wastefully over-servicing some areas, while other areas had no schools at all. So-called "Denominational" schools were a definite problem, and this drove the formation of Government schools which included religious instruction. It was not driven by the idea that religious instruction was worthwhile, but rather by the pragmatic need for a deal which would allow better education. We've no reason to believe Henry Parkes actively endorsed scripture. He sought "equality" rather than being pro- or anti- religion. It is reasonable to think Parkes would nowadays endorse "equality" between believers and non-believers. We see evidence for this in an article in the Sydney Morning Herald on the 31st of August 1844, and in articles in the Maitland Mercury on the 27th of December 1866 and the 15th of November 1879.

At the time of the development of the education policy, advocates such as Edward Smith Hall clearly saw "Secular" as meaning the complete non-involvement of religion – he felt it wrong that **any** public money be used to support religion, including in education. It was clearly one way the word was used at the time.

Quite separately to NSW Government policy, or the teaching of ethics or scripture, the Commonwealth Government in the past decade or so has enabled the formation of different independent schools, with varying driving approaches or religions. Things have come full circle, with divisive "sectarian schools" now re-appearing, as noted by Canberra researcher Dr. Mark Drummond.

SEE might be said to violate policy. Perhaps. The point is we now see that prior policy is not good for our times, and needs to be updated. While once a significant proportion of the community could be relied to on to identify with some form of Christianity, this is no longer the case; many parents identify as non-religious.

An alternative to SRE / scripture would mean that people could learn about values they hold as important. We do not see why that hour should be limited to "religious" lessons, particularly given how the religious makeup of the community has changed.

Nile wants to claim the nature of this hour is privileged - and constrained - by agreements made over a hundred years ago. We want to see that hour as something different - about values / ethics / philosophy / religious education rather than just "religious" education. We suspect this is the motivation for the historical argument - narrowing what is possible during that hour.

It is claimed that all churches are against ethics education; in fact the Uniting Church supports it, as shown in an article in their Insight magazine, a media release and their earlier submission.

11. Conclusion

We believe SEE to be a worthwhile endeavour, and our belief is shared by many in the state. To repeal SEE would frustrate a great many parents; to let it continue would mean that people who wanted ethics education would still have it.

We would be happy for there to be a referendum of all parents who send their children to state schools on whether ethics classes should be provided as an alternative to scripture classes. This would be democracy in action; a great deal of the debate seems to be that there are problems with the teaching and/or a lack of support. If there is a lack of support, that would be shown; and even if there are problems, the outcome of a referendum would then indicate parents' willingness to endorse the education regardless of any such problems as might exist. Parents have rights about how their children are to be educated; rather than having laws which limit their options, these rights should be embraced.