

Australian government to fund chaplains in public and private schools

Erika Zimmer
11 January 2007

Under the guise of helping young people, the Australian government has allocated \$90 million over the next three years to fund the appointment of chaplains in government as well as private schools.

The National School Chaplaincy Programme will pay \$20,000 per year to any school—secular or religious—to support the employment of a chaplain. Schools will be required to nominate a chaplain of any specific religious affiliation, who will then be vetted by a government-appointed board. The entire project overturns the fundamental democratic principle of separation of church and state.

The scheme has nothing to do with any genuine concern for students and the difficulties they confront. As outraged teachers', parents' and student counsellors' organisations have pointed out, it will instead allow individuals without formal qualifications, including religious bigots, to prey upon young people with social, emotional and psychological problems.

Australian Capital Territory Council of Parents and Citizens Association president Jane Gorrie, for example, remarked: "We think it's a very divisive proposal. Government schools are secular, so putting in religious chaplains is basically giving religious access to government schools and young people at their most vulnerable moment."

Prime Minister John Howard has ruled out suggestions that schools could apply for the funding for counsellors rather than chaplains. The scheme was to be an avowedly religious one, he told the media. "To call a chaplain a counsellor is to bow to political correctness. Chaplain has a particular connotation, people understand it, they know exactly what I'm talking about."

The program was first publicly flagged in the *Sunday Age* on June 11, but Howard waited until October 29 to make the announcement, seizing upon a horrific car accident in which four teenage students were killed in a tragedy that reverberated nationally. Workplace Relations Minister Kevin Andrews immediately linked the deaths to the chaplain plan, telling reporters: "We've seen tragedies in recent days in schools in New South Wales for example, and a lot of young people want someone they can talk to outside the normal teachers in a school."

The government's posturing as a friend of Australian youth is completely fraudulent. Its pro-market agenda has created immense social problems for the majority of young people. Recent reports reveal a generation of teenagers fearful of the future, under enormous academic and other stress and having to choose between

running up a huge tertiary education debt or being consigned to a lifetime of poorly-paid and increasingly casualised work.

Mission Australia's 2006 survey of 14,700 young people aged between 11 and 24 years reported that depression remained the number one issue, with 28 percent and 21.5 percent of respondents respectively indicating suicide and self-harm as major concerns. In an indication of the extent of peer and academic pressures, 30.2 percent of 11-14 year-olds expressed deep concerns about alcohol and other drug issues, while the top issue for 15-19 year-olds was coping with stress.

An Australian Childhood Foundation 2006 study of approximately 1,000 young people aged between 10 and 17 years found that 44 percent were unsure whether their generation would be better off than their parents, while 27 percent were worried the world would end before they grew old.

One in four felt they never did well enough, a situation attributable to the highly competitive environment that now exists in schools. More than one in ten could not recall being happy at all in the previous month. Many said their parents were critical in their lives but that they were denied time with them because of work pressures. Not surprisingly, because of the need for both parents to bring in an income—as well as single parents—71 percent of parents said they struggled to find time to spend with their children.

A 2006 report from the Brotherhood of St Laurence estimated that the 12 to 24 age group made up 36 percent of all homeless people, and that 16 percent of young people between 15 and 19 years live below the poverty line, in "households that struggle to pay for transport and for items such as text books and school excursions and even school photos." The report said it had become normal for young people to enter an unstable job market where casual, part-time and short-term employment prevailed.

According to the *Kids Help Line* website, 25 percent of disadvantaged youth suffer from mental health problems, yet only one out of four receives professional help.

Schools are thus increasingly being called upon to deal with complex and troubling problems in young people's lives, but funding for school counsellors is totally inadequate. According to New South Wales Teachers Federation deputy president Angelo Gavrielatos, there is only one school counsellor per 1,000 students in the state.

While a number of chaplaincy services, predominately locally-funded, operate in schools in the states of Victoria and

Queensland, the establishment of a national school chaplaincy scheme is unprecedented.

Howard denied he was “ramming religion down people’s throats” and emphasised the program’s voluntary nature. But the scheme will openly promote religion in school life and further undermine the public, secular education system. It will provide a windfall for the growing number of religious schools that the federal government has generously funded, and place pressure on government schools to appoint chaplains so as not to fall behind in the race to attract enrolments and hence funding.

As several commentators have suggested, the program is so blatant that it may infringe section 116 of the Australian Constitution, which states: “The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.”

Beset by conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, Australia’s colonial ruling elite had various motives for establishing non-denominational schooling in the 1870s. One factor, though, was the influence of liberal and humanist ideals for education, with the conviction that science and reason, not the obscurantist language of “good versus evil” should be used to understand and explain the world.

Over the following century, a tradition of secular schooling developed, primarily funded by the state governments. In the 1960s, however, both Liberal and Labor federal governments began to augment funding to primary and secondary education, primarily for the benefit of private, mostly religious schools.

By the late 1970s, government school enrolments began to decline as a proportion of the total, with parents under mounting pressure to pay fees in order to send their children to better-funded and resourced private colleges. After coming to office in 1996, the Howard government further boosted private institutions, not only favouring wealthy elite schools but also spawning the creation of hundreds of new church-based schools.

While the growth of religious schools has taken place under the free-market nostrums of “choice” and “competition” a more open shift toward the promotion of religion is underway. In 2004, Howard blamed the fall in public school enrolments on their being “too politically correct and too values-neutral”. Likewise, his parliamentary secretary for the environment and heritage Greg Hunt revealed the true intention of the chaplains scheme, when he denounced state schools for being “anti-religious”. He said the program would be an “opportunity for values-based guidance and religious education that a chaplain could provide”.

As these comments indicate, the scheme meshes with the government’s “Australian values” campaign to promote nationalism, bigotry and anti-Muslim prejudice amid the escalation of US-led militarism in the Middle East, aggressive Australian military-backed interventions in the Asia-Pacific, and the assault on democratic rights at home, under the aegis of the “war on terror”.

The chaplains program is designed to inculcate unthinking obedience and discipline, while throwing a veil over the connection between the government’s socio-economic policies

and the difficulties facing young people. It is also deeply divisive.

For all the government’s claims that the scheme will not discriminate against any particular religious faiths, Muslims are its most obvious targets, together with atheists, agnostics and other non-Christians. Western Australia Secondary School Executives Association president Alison Woodman told the media: “I suspect we are being used as a pawn in the Christian versus non-Christian debate.”

The plan will set in motion an insidious process whereby individual schools will inevitably become identified with different religions, denominations and sects. A Sydney school principal told an ABC “Encounter” program: “If we have someone from the Catholic community, don’t we offend the Church of England? If we have someone from the Church of England community, would we offend the Methodists?”

As principal of a special school for students with social and educational problems, she explained: “[W]e talked about maybe an indigenous counsellor, or someone from an indigenous church or community. However, a similar problem arises: what about the Maori community? What about the Island community? Are they going to say, ‘Look are we not good enough, that we don’t have people from our communities to be spiritual advisors?’”

The government’s ability to implement the program has not arisen out of any groundswell of demand for more religion. In the 2001 census, while 68 percent of people classified themselves as Christians, 15 percent stated “no religion” and 12 percent declined to answer the question—a total of 27 percent, up by nearly 2 percentage points since 1996. Active participation in religion—measured by weekly attendance at church—has been estimated at around 7.5 percent.

But the government has the full support of the “opposition” Labor party. The chaplains program was immediately backed by federal Labor leader, Kim Beazley, when it was first announced and Beazley’s replacement, Kevin Rudd, has placed his own religious views at the centre of Labor’s strategy for winning the 2007 federal election.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact