



VICTORIAN HUMANIST

Monthly Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.

Volume 45 No. 6

July 2006

School chaplains – a bad idea

The proposal to co-fund chaplains in state schools, is a bad idea. Aimed at injecting christian values into state schools, it is, as professor Judith Bessant of RMIT wrote in *The Age* [25/6/06], “provocative and divisive.” Here are some reasons why.

Christianity has no monopoly on ethics and values. Australia has no state religion and Australians are free to hold an ethical life philosophy like humanism, or have a religion, christian or other. When tackling problems, whether individual and social, most people use reason, commonsense, self-awareness and personal autonomy. They look to family and friends for support, and try to do what is best by reference to actual needs and experiences, rather than to religious rules and commandments. It is this practical, enlightened approach that has liberated people in modern societies from both religious and state authoritarianism.

In a multicultural society, with its mix of religions and life philosophies, getting on with others requires tolerance of difference. Australians have developed a tolerance of diverse, freely chosen life styles that do no harm to others. Through Australian laws and in recognition of international statements, human rights have been widened – women are no longer second class citizens, children have rights, and people are free to make a range of choices in respect of reproduction, partners and family composition.

Such advances in human rights have been achieved through secular humanist campaigns, often in the face of christian opposition. And today it is mainly sectional christian opposition that lobbies tirelessly to block measures that broaden personal choices in such areas as same-sex unions, voluntary euthanasia and stem cell research.

State schools are secular learning environments, where children from religious and non-religious homes can mix together and learn to respect differences. To propose christian chaplains in state school is clearly divisive, and “disrespectful of the religion and secular beliefs of many Australians”. No one should be swayed by anecdotal stories about successful school chaplains. The overriding argument is that secular counselors and mentors should be provided as an integral part of good quality state school education, not as an “extra”, to be funded by lamington stalls and government largesse.

The important moral issues of today are getting on with each other, locally and globally, and learning to live sustainably on our over-exploited planet. And as was true of the past few centuries it will be via a secular humanist approach that such pressing issues will be addressed. Christianity can contribute but not on the assumption it is the only sources of values.

Come and have your say on this issue on Sunday 9 July.

Rosslyn Ives, HSV President

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Monthly HSV Public Lecture

**Thursday
27 July
8.00 pm**

Balwyn Library Meeting Room
336 Whitehorse Rd. Balwyn

John Langmore

A Professorial Fellow in the Political Science Department, University of Melbourne, who has researched and written on Australia’s relations with the UN.

‘What shall we do with the United Nations?’

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HSV DIARY DATES

HSV Public Lectures 8.00 pm 4th Thursday of the month
HSV Discussions 11.00 am 2nd Sunday of the month

JULY

- 4 Tuesday 8.00pm Existentialist Society. Unitarian Church Hall, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne.
Peter Cuffe: *'Angst and Creativity: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche & Munch.'*
- 6 Thursday 7.30pm UN Ass. Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd, Hon. Justice Shane Marshall:
'Justice or Appeasement – Human Rights in East Timor.'
- 9 Sunday 9.30am **HSV Committee meeting**
11am **Discussion**, 2 Houston Crt, Box Hill South. Current submissions: see p.3. All members welcome. Bring food for shared lunch.
- 11 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton.
Paul Murchison *'God: What is it?'*
- 12 Wednesday 6.30pm Rationalist Soc. Trades Hall, Victoria St, Carlton.
Jocelyne Scutt, outspoken feminist lawyer: *'Fundamentalism, Vilification and the Rights of Women in the Australian Republic.'*
- 27 Thursday 8pm **HSV Public Lecture**
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn.
John Langmore: *'What shall we do with the United Nations?'*

AUGUST

- 1 Tuesday 8pm Existentialist Society. Unitarian Church Hall, 110 Grey St., East Melbourne.
Nigel Sinnott: *'The Rev. Stewart Headlam & friends: Anglo-Catholics, Atheists, Actors, Aesthetes & Radicals.'*
- 3 Thursday 7.30pm UN Ass. Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd. Balwyn. Dr. Paul Battersby program manager, International Studies, School of Global Studies, Social Science & Planning RMIT University.
'The United Nations: Architecture or Infrastructure?'
- 8 Tuesday 8pm Atheist Society. Trades Hall, Victoria St., Carlton.
Graeme Lindenmayer: *'Intelligent Design as a Scientific Theory.'*
- 13 Sunday **9.30am HSV Committee meeting**
11am **Discussion**. 2 Houston Crt, Box Hill South.
Current submissions. All members welcome.
BYO food for shared lunch.
- 24 Thursday 8pm **HSV Public Lecture**
Balwyn Library, 336 Whitehorse Rd, Balwyn.
Philippa Smales, HSV/CAPPE scholar, on the ethics of sweatshop work.

For latest Humanist news and updates

HSV website
home.vicnet.net.au/~humanist/main/main.html

Humanist Society of Victoria



Inc. (Reg. No. A0020272M)

A non-profit, educational organisation.

The **Humanist Society of Victoria** works to build a more civilised society with ethics based on human values. It considers that reason, free inquiry and a scientific approach enable us to understand our universe and our place in it. It defends freedom and democracy and provides a positive alternative to religious and dogmatic creeds. It supports separation of church and state, and secular education.

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Victorian Humanist (VH)

Monthly newsletter of the
Humanist Society of Victoria Inc.
Deadline for letters, notices and short items, 20th of the month.

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| Editor | Rosslyn Ives |
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| Reader | Stephen Stuart |
| Mailout | Ray Dahlitz & HSV Volunteers |

Views expressed by contributors to this newsletter are those of the writers and do not necessarily represent the views of the Society.



Sunday 9 July HSV Discussion

Main topics for discussion:

- Proposal for government-funded chaplains in state schools.
- 'Religion' question in 2006 Census. How humanists might answer this question.
- Victoria's Racial and Religious Tolerance Act.

All members welcome, 2 Houston Crt, Box Hill South.

Sukunan Relief Fund

Help the rebuilding of rural village life

The Indonesian village of Sukunan, home of Iswanto, HSV guest speaker for April, was badly damaged by the recent earthquake that affected Java. HSV Committee has sent \$300 to assist with relief and rebuilding. Members who want to aid Sukunan village to rebuild and prevent this rural land from falling into the hands of urban developers, should send individual donations **which can be claimed as tax deductions**. Make your cheque out to "Monash University" and send it to:

Sukunan Relief Fund
c/- Professor Marika Vicziany
Monash Asia Institute
Building 11, Monash University
Victoria 3800.

Conference on Separating Church and State

This Conference was very successful with excellent and informative speakers. It is expected that the proceedings will be published.

Many thanks to Stephen Stuart, the CAHS and HSV representative on the conference organising committee.

Winter Solstice Social

Many thanks for those who came along to enjoy convivial company. Special thanks to Halina Strnad who opened her home and so graciously hosted this regular event. Several "left" items are hoping owners will turn up soon and claim them.

'Blue' leaflet

A new version of the HSV introductory leaflet has been produced. Members will receive a copy in the next mailout along with August *VH* and Spring *Australian Humanist*.

Victorian Peace Network (VPN)

HSV, an affiliate of the VPN, has maintained its support by making a \$200 donation towards bringing activists like Cindy Sheehan from overseas.

Roy Brown's Visit

Victorian Humanists were pleased to welcome and host Roy Brown on his brief visit to Melbourne for the Conference on Separating Church and State.

Roy is a British-born human rights activist based in Switzerland. He was president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) 2003 – April 2006, and Chair of the Committee for Growth and Development. For past three years he has been the IHEU's main representative at the UN Human Rights Commission (now Council) in Geneva.

In April 2006 Roy was jointly awarded the first "Free Press Prize" of the Danish Free Press Society for his work in defending freedom of speech at the United Nations.

Roy appeared on ABC Radio 774 with Jon Faine and Jill Singer Friday 16 June, and despite jet lag handled the interview most professionally. He addressed the Conference on Saturday 17 June on "Why the West must defend freedom of speech." And on Sunday evening Roy and his Swiss travelling companions, Vivienne and Laurent, attended an informal dinner hosted by the HSV Committee.

Roy urged us to continue the conference theme, through a national network between all secular groups and people focused on the theme of separation of religion and state. He invited HSV to consider offering funding assistance to IHEU's development program which is fostering freethought and welfare activities in India and Africa. And he echoed the HSV presidents comment that one of the benefits of being a Humanist member was that it was possible to meet up with other humanists in many countries across the world.

Valete

Celine Rapoport

3 June 1932 – 5 June 2006

Celine with her husband Paul, was a regular attendee at public lectures, and one of the few members who read the French freethought publications which HSV receives.

Sincere sympathy to Paul and family.

Evelyn Rothfield OAM

15 June 2006, aged 96

Evelyn and husband Norman have worked and lobbied for peace and friendship, especially between Jews and Arabs. She was a playwright, and an activist in women's organisations, including President of National Council of Jewish Women and International Vice-president of Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Sincere sympathy to Norman and family.

SUBMISSIONS

To the Federal Minister of Education the Hon. Julie Bishop we made the following main points:

- We are concerned about the growing erosion of educational equality.
- Access to education is vital now when knowledge and expertise form the basis of national and personal prosperity.
- We urge increased public funding for all levels of schooling and regard this as a cost-effective investment in the nation's human resources.
- When left to market forces, society and education lose much of its human potential.
- The very high cost of tertiary education – prohibitive for many – creates a divide between the educational haves and have-nots, leading to an upstairs-downstairs society. Egalitarianism, an attractive Australian value, is thus violated.
- Globally there is an increasing trend to invest in education. This is not evident in Australia. Our schools and universities have to rely on fundraising.
- Decreasing funding and legislation shift the cost of education on to our students, who already meet a greater share of cost of their studies than students in other countries.
- Discounts on upfront payments favour the more affluent; this discrimination should be removed by granting Austudy payments to those who find the fees beyond their means.
- Public funding is needed to protect universities from commercial pressures, which erode the pursuit of excellence.

There is a widening disparity in the provision of resources in our secondary education system, evident in the two-tiered private-public school divide. Thus it is difficult for government school students to gain admission to universities, while the resource-rich private schools produce a much higher proportion of such students. Clearly parental wealth and not academic merit is the determinant here.

We oppose the notion of elite schools. It is important that society's future leaders, be they judges, public servants, educators, scientists, artists or medicos should come from all social levels, not only the privileged. It is beneficial for such future leaders to have interaction and experience with a wide cross-section of the community.

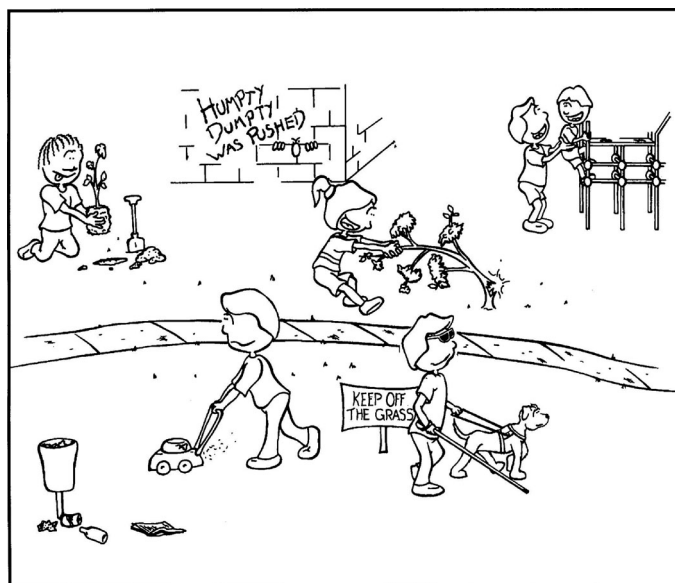
Judith Biddington and Halina Strnad

Humanist Ethical Education, No. 4

Personal preferences

Aim: To broaden the children's understanding of the many things going on around them every day, some of which are acceptable in some places but questionable in others; they may develop their own personal preferences.

Give each child their own enlarged copy of the picture below, plus highlighting pens to mark which activities were bad, good, right or wrong in a different colour.



The children then give the people in the picture names and write their own stories about them. Select some of the children to share their stories with the others.

Adapted from *Resources for Studying Ethics in Primary Schools*, 1996, with permission from Queensland Department of Education.

Quips

- * Santa's helpers are subordinate clauses.
- * A lot of money is tainted – it taint yours and it taint mine.
- * Those who get too big for their breeches will be exposed in the end.
- * When two egotists meet, it's an I for an I.
- * When a clock is hungry, it goes back four seconds.
- * Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.
- * She was engaged to a man with a wooden leg but broke it off.
- * An archeologist is someone whose life is in ruins.

Critiquing Consumerism

HSV Public Lecture by Associate Professor Kim Humphery, School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, on 25 May 2006 at Balwyn Library Meeting Room.

Report by Jennie Stuart

Paid work, as a general rule, and the consequent practice of consumption have been central to our way of life only since the 1800s. But we may now, it seems, be at crisis point. Over the last ten years a considerable number of best-selling books have been published on overwork and overspending in the West, suggesting that our high levels of consumption constitute a disease based on affluence and abundance – luxury fever or “affluenza”. They usually allude to the true cost of our consumerism and materialism, including the environmental effects of resource depletion and waste disposal, the inequitable global imbalance of wealth and opportunity, the repercussions on social relationships when these are relegated to second place by overwork and the increasing levels of stress, illness and unhappiness in our society. In the 1950s Vance Packard and J.K. Galbraith offered similar warnings – Karl Marx even earlier.

Dr Humphery shares the concern about our tendency for ‘overconsumption’, that is, our habit of consuming far more than is needed to sustain a reasonable life. However, in his view the resurgent critique of consumerism of recent years has several shortcomings. Firstly, contemporary critics, he believes, tend to *define* overarchingly our society and our lives as rampantly materialistic, with scant consideration of all else. In this context we are viewed rather patronisingly as mindlessly duped consumers, simply conditioned to shop. But this rather self-indulgent position of moral superiority blocks the more important examination of why, as individuals, we consume and why, as a society, we consume so much.

Although many critics are well intentioned in promoting consumerism for public debate, their journalistic approach is often simplistic and poorly researched. For example the notion of “affluenza” runs the risk of medicalising the issues, reducing broad social problems to individual clinical pathologies, making reference to shopping as a displacement or sublimation of deeper needs. Thus, shopping becomes a kind of personal psychological dependency rather than being seen for what it is – a conventional economic activity which we all routinely undertake, in the context of a capitalist economic system over which we have little control as individuals. Furthermore, the moralistic undertones are potentially divisive: compare the hyperconsumer or “compulsive shopper” to one who has seen the light and ‘down-shifted’!

In reality, consumerism in the West is driven by many factors. Our lifestyle is undoubtedly imbued with

consumerism. Increasingly, over the last twenty to thirty years social status and success have been linked to material consumption, and with it a sense of personal security. Bombarded by advertising we are manipulated to buy. But this does not mean that materialism is all there is to our way of life. We are constantly juggling many other values, families and friendships, as well as simple pleasures such as lying on the beach. Social research shows that these matter to us more than our commodities do. There is also solid evidence to show that much of the work that we undertake is not for the purpose of making money: for example, housework, mowing a neighbour’s lawn or voluntary work. Nor has the proportion of time we spend in unpaid work relative to paid employment shrunk over the last few decades.

Nevertheless, consumption levels in our society are very high, in global terms, and are rising. Why? It is largely systemic. The constraints of our economic framework make it almost impossible for us not to consume, and at relatively high levels. As well as advertising and marketing, governments applaud consumption as a factor of economic growth; their critics and those who would caution another road go unheeded. But it is also undeniable that commodity capitalism offers us real satisfaction and real pleasure. The things that we can buy often make our lives easier and better, although the level of happiness may not equal that promised by advertising, and dissatisfaction is easily engineered by the lure of new products and the promise of improved technology.

While critics may see consumerism as a form of spiritual malaise, the world of material things is an essential part of who we are as human beings and of our culture. To own and possess is an innate human trait, and even the most mundane objects may be deeply meaningful for us as individuals. In a cultural sense, commodities may be seen as beautiful and an affirmation of human ingenuity and skill.

Have we become hyper-materialistic? The historical evidence suggests that Australians in 2006 are no more materialistic, as a whole, than they were fifty years ago. Perhaps we are even less materialistic now, in that we tend to value less well the goods that we buy, throwing them away more readily, rather than ‘looking after’ them as our parents counselled. Products are also designed for more rapid turnover; they break down or become obsolete more quickly than before. In our current world we are locked into a model of globalised, corporate profit-making at the expense of other transactions, such as cultural

exchange. However progressive globalisation has also provoked a counter interest in localisation.

Therefore, if we are to address our current high levels of consumption, a more constructive, gentler approach may be required. Rather than a rejection in principle of consumption levels deemed to be in excess of simple necessity, we need to reflect on how, why and how much we shop, and be more aware of how much we consume in the way of other resources, such as electricity. There is room for a more positive approach. Take the 'slow food' movement as a case in point, where the pleasures of the material world are celebrated, along with a more responsible approach to cultural tradition and the environment.

Talent shines at 90

Marg Stork, *Monash Journal* (DOMAIN) 10.4.2006

LAURIE Coles,* 90, is a woman of many attributes. As a nonagenarian blessed with good health, she can proudly claim to be a foundation member and the oldest member of U3A Waverley Inc (University of the Third Age).

She's also been a tutor in music appreciation at the university and still conducts lessons in music appreciation for vision-impaired people and for private groups who meet at her home.

Mrs Coles has undertaken more than 20 courses at U3A Waverley, including science, literature and philosophy, and her thirst for knowledge remains unquenchable.

She is still driving her own car and holds a 50-year membership of the RACV.

"I've always loved music and the arts, and I learned to play the piano at a very young age.

"I've been closely involved with amateur theatre," Mrs Coles says, enunciating each word clearly and with perfect diction.

"The world is full of wonderful things to do and I'm so thankful I'm still here. I have a very supportive and a very loving family and, expanding family."

Mrs Coles has three children, a son and two daughters, 11 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

She has lived on the same block of land for 65 years. The house she now occupies on the block is one she designed herself.

"My husband, Sam, who died in 1997, served with the 2/2 nd Pioneers in New Guinea in 1940," she said.

"I bought the block for £250 when Sam was in the Islands."

* Long-time and active HSV member including a stint on the Committee.

Australian Skeptics National Convention

Melbourne

18 & 19 November 2006

THEME

"Science, Truth & the Media"

Details & Registration at

www.skeptics.com.au/convention/2006/

Letter

I am a self-proclaimed Atheist and Secular Humanist and have been a member of HSV since earlier this year. On Saturday 17 June I attended the panel discussion on church and state separation along with a Christian friend of mine. At 21 years of age I must have been the youngest person there. How dismayed I was to sit, almost looking into the future, and discover that in another 21 years I may become a bitter Atheist. I had thought that this stigma was false but how wrong I was proven to be after the display from some members of the audience.

Most of the audience's questions directed at the panel were loaded with their own opinions, resulting in long-winded, closed questions and rendered the panel discussion useless. It seemed that these audience members would prefer to force their own opinion on others but not listen to the other side's reply.

It is appalling to think that Humanism is moving in the direction seen through these actions. How embarrassing it was for me, there with my Christian friend, that I should consider my values and belief system to be aligned with theirs. Their attacking remarks showed how many Atheists think that faith is entirely irrational and stupid, yet surely the panel proved that intelligence and faith do in fact co-exist. I was shocked to hear these attacks that showed such intolerance of another person's belief system. This hypocrisy nullifies their label of 'Humanist'. On the other hand, the respect the panel was able to show for people with different viewpoints is how we, as Humanists, should act.

Watching the panelists, I sat in awe. In their element, they spoke concisely, with great eloquence and were clearly knowledgeable in their particular fields. How wonderful it was to hear, instead of just one side of the story, debate between intelligent people who show nothing but reverence for one another, despite their obvious differences in beliefs.

Every panellist agreed that church and state separation is desirable. So why then, are we arguing when we all desire the same thing? Why aren't we working together to make it so? I want a society where people have the right to choose what happens to their body, where any two people in a loving relationship can be married and have the same rights as everyone else. I want to make sure that I have the freedom to believe what I want, that I will be tolerated regardless, and that other people's belief systems and values are not forced upon me. I also want this for everyone else, whether they are Christian, Atheists, Scientologists, or whatever.

I urge every person who calls themselves a Humanist to start acting like they are one. It is part of our core values to tolerate the beliefs of others and not deride them for the sake of our own grievances. Such disdainful arguments are only insulting, they achieve no ends and instead cause further rifts, where we should be working together on more important issues like keeping god out of government. Personal beliefs are not the enemy, and we need only attack when religion inhibits someone's rights, as in the cases of gay marriage, euthanasia and abortion. My Christian friends are some of the most considerate, loving and intelligent people I know. Let's prove that it is possible to be this way without a god.

Richard Breen, Boronia <rbreen@froggy.com.au>

[Editor's comment. The conference was open to the public and attracted people other than Humanists.]

Let us send all children to state primary schools. Here's why

The Age, Wednesday 27 July 2005

DENNIS ALTMAN

Now more than ever, our kids need to know and respect other cultures.

As cultural and religious differences increase in Australia, the experience of other countries, such as Britain and the Netherlands, suggests the possibility of 'balkanisation' – the development of self-perpetuating groups deeply alienated from the larger society. We need responses that are more imaginative than increasing police powers or group hugs for clerics.

Despite the rhetoric of diversity and tolerance, religious differences threaten social cohesion in ways that are not true of diversity of racial and ethnic origin. Indeed, the overall success of multiculturalism owes much to the indifference most Australians, including most migrants, show towards religion. The growth of fundamentalism – among Christians as much as among Muslims – makes it increasingly urgent to discuss that balance.

Where religion begins to inform everyday values and practices, and leads believers to impose their beliefs on others, there is an unavoidable tension with principles of democratic government. This is as true of Catholics who wish to criminalise abortion, or fundamentalist Protestants who want to ban sex education, as it is of Muslims who oppose the rights of women to be regarded as equal citizens.

Liberal democracy rests on certain agreed values that recognise that individuals deserve equal treatment in all areas of social life. This does not exclude committed believers from active participation in political life, but it does require them to acknowledge that particular religious beliefs not shared by the majority cannot determine their policies. John Kennedy was elected the first Catholic president of the United States in 1960 after his public acceptance of this position.

While Australia has no overarching statement of national principles equivalent to the United States Declaration of Independence or bill of rights, most Australians believe in a set of values, however inchoately expressed, that guarantee basic democratic rights and practices. There is a genuine national interest in preserving and strengthening these values. A society that tolerates the intolerant will find itself increasingly unable to preserve its freedoms.

If multiculturalism means the constant reshaping of our sense of who we are through a recognition of the diversity of the Australian population (not least the indigenous population), it is no threat to democracy or freedom. The growth of minority communities, which reject the basic rights of others and avoid any involvement in the larger community is, however, a real threat.

Nor should the onus for achieving social cohesion rest only with recently arrived migrant communities. As both federal and state governments have supported the rapid growth of private schools – Australia has one of the highest percentages of school students in religious schools of any Western country, and goes much further than does the United States in funding private schools – an increasing number of

Australian children are being educated in ghettos, whether formed by wealth or by faith.

Muslim migrants who send their children to religious schools are merely following what is becoming a more and more common pattern of division in Australian society.

When immigrants, or religious communities, cluster together in certain suburbs, allowing them to keep their language and places of worship, this can strengthen a broader commitment to social diversity. But diversity becomes another word for social fragmentation when it produces active resistance to the values of the broader society, through withdrawing children from the school system for 'home schooling' or discouraging women from higher education.

There is a strong case for requiring all children, whatever their religion or ethnicity, to undertake at least their primary education in a state school. Such a policy would be bitterly attacked as an infringement of parental choice and of the right to teach children according to particular religious doctrines. But parents do not have unlimited rights, and children have the right to be aware of other beliefs and to learn the civic values of their society. Such a policy has the merit of treating all Australians equally, rather than merely focusing on those who are most obviously different, which at this point means Muslims.

The benefits would be enormous. Not only would it mean young Australians could not grow up in isolation, whether this be the isolation of privileged grammar schools or small under-resourced religious schools. If all children were to spend their early years in the state school system, there would immediately be political pressures to ensure that system was as good as the best of the private schools.

Time could be allowed for religious classes in such a system, as long as students were also exposed to debates about the nature of religion and some understanding of religious conflicts. Bringing all children into the same classrooms could actually strengthen multiculturalism, which requires different communities to interact with each other.

Properly handled, it could create both greater social cohesion and greater awareness of diversity.

Dennis Altman is professor of politics at La Trobe University.