

# Humanist Society

of New South Wales Inc.



## "Defending the tolerant secular State"

### *President's Welcome*

If you are an atheist or agnostic who is looking for how to take it further, the NSW Humanists may well hit the spot. Humanism is an ethical approach which embraces compassion and tolerance, and holds that you *can* be ethical without the need for God. Too many people wrongly see a connection. Humanists "plant the flag" for an ethics which is valid but does not rely on a supernatural power, and support secular (non religious) tolerance.

If you've been looking around for a group which considers and discusses the world from a humanist standpoint, you can join a group of like minded people. We discuss issues arising around humanism - in person at our social gatherings, more formally when we listen to a talk at the Humanist Afternoon talk, held regularly - and also in dialogue through *Viewpoints*, the NSW Humanist Newsletter, and the national publication *The Australian Humanist*. You can join and become active - or merely draw solace from the fact you are a part of a community of like minded people.

Several decades ago, it was difficult to become a school teacher if you were an atheist, and access to abortion was illegal. Atheists were discriminated against. The world has changed - in Australia, atheists are no longer much discriminated against - but new challenges have arisen.

Laws masquerading as "family values" were a religious intervention in our lives - and when the intervention was not direct, a range of tax benefits directed people to lifestyles which the religious favour.

Creationism, and irrationality generally is on the increase - and Creationists are becoming more politically active, lobbying for everyone to be taught creationism. Creationism being indoctrinated to those in religious schools is bad enough - but its even worse that it be taught to everyone, including non believers. But this is the

push that believers have at present. We in the Humanists have tried to change the nature of religious and other education in schools, by introducing Humanism or ethics lessons as a replacement to Religious Instructions in Schools. The Queensland Humanists pushed for this recently; it was quashed by the religious lobby, with support from the then Federal Government. Religious instruction became more pernicious with Howard's previous Government sponsoring religious chaplains in schools.

While we currently have access to abortion, voluntary euthanasia continues to be suppressed for reasons which ultimately derive from narrow religious readings.

But it is not all bad. We have recently seen a renewed surge of interest in atheism, with the publication and discussion of various books on the subject, and atheism is becoming more mainstream in the Australian media. The challenges are there; but so to are the possibilities and reasons to look forward to the future, and there is much the NSW Humanists can do.

My comments not intended to be party political. For all the religious influence on past Liberal Government policy, the Liberal party was not always that way; in times past it endorsed the tolerant secular state, and the freedom of individuals to choose their own beliefs and lifestyles. Since losing Government, some individuals in the Liberal Party have been making the right noises. Perhaps the Liberal Party can find its way back to what it stood for before Howard.

Rudd is an advance on Howard. The majority of his ministers affirmed, and there is reason to believe that Rudd's religious sentiments will not take him to the same place as Howard's did. But, equally Labor in opposition supported some quite regressive Liberal party policies, and I share many Australian's concerns over the funding of religious schools. Further, at the time of writing, Rudd has decided to persist with

Howard's policy of not funding overseas aid which incorporates any support or information regarding abortion - a hold-over from the deal Howard made with Harradine. Rudd has also indicated an inclination to take the views of other believers more seriously. So, while an advance, there are still concerns about Rudd.

Further, I acknowledge those religious believers whose belief does not stop them from supporting women's access to abortion and voluntary euthanasia. Regardless of the details, we have common ground with many believers on issues of war and refugees. I also endorse the concerns of religious minorities who endorse the secular state, and feel marginalised by the dominant Christian culture.

But, in any case, I invite you to join the NSW Humanists, and partipate to whatever degree you feel inclined

John August  
President



## Who are we?

Humanism as a philosophy traces its roots to the Ancient Greeks, who saw in human beings the measure of all things, and who saw in reason the solution to all human problems.

Though lost during the Dark Ages of ignorance and superstition, humanism returned as the great intellectual movement of the Enlightenment.

In 1960, inspired by the enlightenment, a group of Australians who believed that a progressive society could only result from individuals making ethical decisions free from religious coercion within a tolerant secular state founded the Humanist Society of NSW.

Today, the Humanist Society of New South Wales is part of the International Humanist and Ethical Union that has formal consultative

status with the United Nations.

Humanist Society members believe that reason and scientific enquiry provide the only real path to the solution of our problems.

Unlike contemporary political pressure groups, but very much in the tradition of the Socratic philosophers, the Humanist Society does not claim to possess glib, ready-made solutions to complex social problems.

Instead, based upon the premise of the fundamental value and dignity of every individual and the vital importance of their personal freedom, humanist believe in solving the social and economic problems of society by following the logical arguments where they lead, and having the moral courage to embrace their own conclusions.

Thus humanists are fundamentally opposed to all dogma, as we believe that the inflexible assertion of purported fact is the antithesis of reasoned argument.

A popular misconception is that humanism is anti-religious. In fact, we simply believe that reason, mutual regard for each other and a spirit of democratic co-operation are alone sufficient to resolve collective issues within society without reference to theistic belief.

We contend that any religious belief that a person may or may not hold is a matter for their individual conscience, and whilst respecting this, we believe that this is not something that should be imposed upon others through law.

Humanists say that the best protection for the beliefs of all individuals is a tolerant secular state in which no one religion is favoured, and in which, consequently, all are free to practice their faith or not believe in God as they so choose.

In an age in which revolutionary communism has been replaced by reactionary religious fanaticism as the principal threat to tolerant democratic states, our Society continues to advocate that reason and compassion are the solution.

At its inception the Humanist Society of NSW condemned and opposed those who sought

use unjust laws or violence to impose their will upon others.

We denounced tyranny that styled itself as liberation, we exposed bigotry and intolerance that called itself religious morality and we sought to change laws which forced religious

ideas onto others.

Today, the opponents we face have changed, but the principles that we seek to defend remain the same: rational solutions to social problems and the promotion of individual prerogatives free from religious interference.