

HUMANIST SOCIETY OF VICTORIA REPRESENTATION ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, 1972–74

In 1972 the Education Minister of the Victorian State Government, the Hon. L.H.S. Thompson, initiated a Committee under the chairmanship of the former Deputy Director General of Education, W.B. Russell, to examine religious education in Government schools. The Humanist Society of Victoria (HSV) sought representation on the Committee, but this was refused.

In 1973 three HSV representatives met the Committee to make a personal submission, which was summarised by the Committee as shown in the 'Russell Report' below. In 1974 the Committee's report was published and Mr Thompson sought public comment. (In 2011 this report is held in the following libraries, National Library of Australia, State Library of Victoria, State Library of N.S.W., and libraries of the following universities: Charles Sturt, Deakin, Edith Cowan, Griffith, La Trobe, Monash, Melbourne, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria.)

In response the HSV wrote a draft letter to the Minister opposing the Committee's findings and seeking an interview to discuss the matter. This did not happen.

The following **statement by the HSV** is on file.

"Although the HSV agrees with the Committee that the present antiquated and doctrinaire system of religious instruction in the Schools should be abolished, it believes that the proposed guidelines for the new course fall far short of the objectivity compatible with a modern educational system.

"The course material cited in the Report still teaches at the primary school level certain doctrines which are controversial among the churches themselves and sets out certain devotional exercises whose purpose is to produce a conditioned response rather than stimulate the intellect.

"In thus endorsing such material the committee has turned its back on a course on Ethics and Comparative Religion, which was submitted to it by the HSV during the course of its deliberations.

"Indeed it went so far in the opposite direction as to demand that School chaplains currently financed by a private organization, namely the Council for Christian Education in Schools, be placed on the State School payroll, and that the present instructors in dogmatic religion should be paid by the state. This would breach the principle that church and state should be separate.

"In the opinion of the HSV only regularly trained school teachers are fit to teach controversial subjects within a state system.

"In the context of the Russell Report it sees preservation of the right to opt out of Religious Instruction as vital.

"Victorian state Schools are open to all students regardless of colour, class or creed. It is the right of these students to be informed about religion. It is also their right not to suffer indoctrination.

"In the view of the HSV the implementation of the recommendations of the Report would lead to dogmatic religion being taught in government schools at the expense of the taxpayer.

"Therefore we are opposed to the Report." (italics are editor's)

Today (2011) HSV moves further from the position of the Russell Report by requesting

(a) that the present 'opt-out' of religious instruction system for children attending state schools be converted to an 'opt-in' system,

(b) that religious instruction be transferred as soon as possible to after school hours, and

(c) that a timetable be set for all religious confessional, devotional and/or dogmatic practices and/or teaching be removed from Government property entirely.

HSV believes that Government-delivered teaching should include all world-views, including religious world-views, without endorsing any particular world-view over another.