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An open letter to Joe 'Secular' Hockey: defender of the faith

Dear Joe

We have just read your speech, 'In Defence Of God':
<http://www.joehockey.com/mediahub/speechDetail.aspx?prID=841>

What a speech, from Turnbull's best mate, the man who does not want Mal's job.

Clearly, it is not designed to buy you credits (certainly not carbon ones anyway) within the extensive religio-extremist sub-branches to be found these days within your Party.

Nor with the small, but expanding, mob of Bible-bashing literalists that you say you have no time for, and who tend to belong to Senator Joyce's branch of the Coalition anyway.

It is a strange speech, since you claim it is not a 'clearing the decks' effort to stake your claim to the leadership with some brand new 'religious' credentials. After all, Malcolm had to convert to Catholicism before he was considered suitable for the job. And neither does it go far enough down the religious path for many of those with whom you must be trying to garner support from. Indeed, it denounces the 'evangelicals', who cast out demons, lay on hands, speak in tongues, and prefer to not pay their tithes to the ATO, unlike we 'ordinary Australians'.

And, considering that most 'ordinary Australians' do not even attend Church, whatever our private views on religion might be, it makes your speech even more peculiar.

Still, now that you have declared your hand, within the 'faith' setting that is, not the 'leadership' one, it was very good to read this, "From my perspective, a secular society respects all faiths and accepts that no religious organisation should seek to impose its views on the functions of government". Indeed, we couldn't agree more.

Which brings us to ask whether or not you support the current push by Coalition MHRs and Senators, from right across the nation, who are currently seeking to mislead electors in their claims that Kevin Rudd is going to 'stop' the funding to school chaplains? It runs out, as you, Julie Bishop, Peter Costello and John Howard designed it to, from 2010.

Since you were in Parliament when Julie Bishop told us all that public schools were 'values free zones', when she and John Howard instituted the NSCP chaplaincy scheme with taxpayers hard-earned dollars, are you now saying that you were wrong to give ATO funds to some only-Christian organisations to enter public schools, and turn them from being, at least 'notional' secular public spaces, into Christian focused public spaces?

Of course, the situation varies from state to state (and territory), but, at least in Queensland, where public schools are not secular, and have not been since 1910, of all the school chaplains that are employed, all but three of them are employed by one evangelising organisation, Scripture Union.

Scripture Union's self-imposed role is clearly stated on their web site- they exist to recruit new souls, from within schools, for Jesus. And of all the chaplains employed in Queensland, up to 600, only one is not a Christian, but of course, that person is employed by a Buddhist organisation, not Scripture Union.

So, being a secular man Joe, and we also note you say, "I believe in a multi-cultural and therefore intrinsically, a multi-faith Australia", does this mean that you are now prepared to write to Mr. Geoff Wilson-MLA, the Education Minister in Queensland, and ask him to explain why Education Queensland has allowed an organisation that openly admits to its evangelising role as a Christian-only organisation to be given free, open, access to young and vulnerable students?

While you are writing, perhaps you could ask Geoff why he is not a supporter of secular public schooling? Queensland has not enjoyed a secular public education system since 1910. These days, apart from the evangelising school chaplains, students in state primary schools still face the 1910 official state sanctioned Bible lessons. These are delivered, not by chaplains or Religious Instruction volunteers, but by employees of the state of Queensland, classroom teachers; public servants who should not be presenting themselves as partisan players promoting any religion at all, never mind Christianity. This is the result of the de-secularisation referendum undertaken 100 years ago:

http://education.qld.gov.au/student-services/inclusive/religion/ri/faqs/docs/bible_lessons.pdf

As you would understand Joe, in 1910, Queensland was hardly the same multi-cultural and multi-faith society it is today. Indeed, your parents would never have stood a chance of settling in Queensland then, even though it was a very Christian state.

Geoff, like you, has nailed his colours to the mast on this. But, unlike you, in your role as a vocal supporter of the secular public space that helps to make Australia the tolerant place it is today, Geoff has informed us that he has absolutely no intention of making Queensland public schools secular. In fact, he is so pleased with the evangelising that goes on in Queensland state schools that he has extended the state funding to chaplains that Beattie invented, by another three years and multi-millions of dollars. Meanwhile, his school teacher employees have to go on strike to get more money.

Of course, no doubt you will insist that 'chaplains are decent people'. Quite so, they probably are, like most people in Australia are. But why are they in schools? Or more correctly, why are they in state public schools? After all, Scripture Union chaplains tell us they are not allowed to speak about God or Jesus: <http://albert-and-logan.wherelive.com.au/news/story/chaplain-needed-more-than-ever/> so what do chaplains do there?

Well, according to the Mayor of Logan, they spend their time counselling students: <http://albert-and-logan.wherelive.com.au/news/story/save-our-counsellors/> but this cannot be, because DEEWR, the funding source for the NSCP scheme, says they are not to counsel students. Mind you, DEEWR also insist on no proselytising, while Education Queensland specifically bans evangelising AND proselytising, although clearly both go on.

How do we know this? Because state schools are full of Scripture Union SUPA (Scripture Union Primary Age) Clubs and JAFFA (Jesus A Friend For All) Clubs, both organised now by NSCP funded school chaplains.

Never heard of a SUPA or JAFFA Club? Oh, well they are all about reading the Bible and getting the word of Jesus to public school children, in public schools. Scripture Union boasts

of 'a network of Christian school teachers within Education Queensland schools', who work with NSCP funded chaplains and volunteers to bring 'Hope' and Jesus to students, from Prep upwards.

Of course Joe, we tend to agree with you again here, "Today individuals are more empowered and better able to determine their own core beliefs. In Christianity, we no longer rely solely on priests to convey and interpret the word of God from an ancient and inaccessible language".

Indeed not, these days we have the NSCP ATO funded school chaplain, Scripture Union, Geoff Wilson and 'a network of Christian teachers' running JAFFA and SUPA Clubs to do it instead.

Funnily enough, Ian Macfarlane-MHR Groom, like Geoff Wilson, is another great believer in the NSCP chaplains. So much so, that on Toowoomba's WIN TV the other night, while he was insisting that Kevin Rudd is about to 'end the funding', the funding that he, like you, only intended to run for three years, he let slip what the Coalition really think about education. In a rambling interview, Ian said that Kevin Rudd should fund the school chaplains instead of 'wasting money on school halls and libraries that no one needs'.

Perhaps, if there were more school libraries in Queensland, and not quite so many networks of evangelising Christian classroom teachers and chaplains prepared to impose their religion on students (and did you know that in Queensland public school teachers can teach Intelligent Design and Creationism in Science and any other lesson?) then the problems with Climate Change might be better understood, and Ian Macfarlane would not have so much trouble explaining to Senator Joyce and the National Party intelligentsia what was going on in the world?

So, our invitation to you, as a fellow secularist Joe, is this:

- Ask your Coalition colleagues to stop fibbing about the NSCP funding as they try to corner Rudd into announcing his \$300 million ATO 'gift' to Scripture Union at the forthcoming Australian Christian Lobby conference that Rudd is opening later this month
- Ask Geoff Wilson and Anna Bligh why they are so against secular public education in Queensland and why they refuse to put 'secular' back in the Education Act
- Ask your MHR and Senate colleagues to support holding an enquiry into the role of NSCP chaplains in public schools throughout Australia
- Ask Kevin Rudd not to be taken in by the 'research' put out by Edith Cowan University that purports to prove NSCP funded chaplains employed by Scripture Union-and their ilk- are an indispensable part of the future of Australia's public schools: <http://www.socialsurvey.com.au/chaplaincyeffectiveness.pdf>
- Come out publicly on the need for secular public education right across Australia.

A good speech Joe, now just follow it up with some action.

Regards,

The Australian Secular Lobby