

The influence of the religious right

Written by Max Wallace | Greenleft.org.au
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The rise of the religious right in Australia and New Zealand can be linked to the development of organisations in the United States that emerged in the 1970s.

These organisations were, at first, concerned about the de-segregation of schools under the administration of then-US president Jimmy Carter.

That is, conservative white North American Christians opposed the idea of their children mixing with Black children.

When their schools were threatened with the loss of tax-exempt status if segregation was not ended, the “religious right”, as we know it today, was born. It was a product of open racism.

However, Christian fundamentalism can be traced back further to older Bible-based sects and the 19th century religious reaction to Darwinism. In Tennessee, teacher John Scopes was put on trial in 1925 for teaching evolution in a public school. A jury found him guilty.

But the case received widespread publicity that discredited fundamentalism in the eyes of many.

However, like anyone who is convinced of their righteousness, fundamentalists believe they have a mission to impose their will on others. They ignore criticism, use a range of means to achieve power, and never give up.

Education

Traditionally, control of education has been a way all religions have sought to influence politics

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and governments to further their agenda. This gives them access to the minds of children. The indoctrinated children of today are potential functionaries for the religion-influenced government of tomorrow.

In the 19th century there were major battles between government and religion about the setting up of state schools in Australia. The industrial revolution needed workers who could read and count. But the churches thought “free, secular and compulsory” education was an attack on their educational hegemony and bitterly opposed these schools.

The various churches also detested each other on doctrinal grounds. This was mainly reflected in the Protestant-Catholic divide. But differences between sectarian factions within these traditions also existed. This made it impossible for government to surrender the education system to one group, as in Catholic Ireland.

So religious-based schools went their own way, and state schools, which educated the majority of children, became non-religious institutions. A trade-off for the loss of this control was the establishment of the legal right for religious education and instruction in state schools for one hour a week, provided parents give permission.

Not happy with that, fundamentalists went further and persuaded the Victorian and Queensland governments to hold referendums to remove the word “secular” from their Education Acts so Bible lessons could be taught in state schools.

This failed in Victoria, but succeeded in Queensland in 1910. To this day, Bible lessons are legal in Queensland state primary schools. The Humanist Society of Queensland is running a campaign to have the word “secular” put back into the Act. They will demonstrate outside the state parliament on April 13, 2010 — the centenary of its removal.

More recently, the Howard government agreed to fund the placement of chaplains in state schools in 2006. In Queensland, the chaplaincy program, run by the Scripture Union, has become a vehicle for open-slasher proselytising. The National School Chaplaincy program continues under Rudd ALP government.

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The '70s and '80s

The modern religious right may have started with racism but it quickly moved to take up a broader agenda. The 1973 Roe v Wade case in the United States, which legalised abortion, infuriated them.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s — partly fuelled by the invention of the oral contraceptive pill — gave them an agenda to fight against.

Their reaction was to aggressively campaign for the traditional nuclear family with Christian values. This included support for: patriarchy, women staying at home with children, regular church-going, prayer and the belief that the Bible is literally correct.

The religious right was also pro-censorship, homophobic, supportive of capital punishment, anti-communist, intensely patriotic and, later, strongly opposed to voluntary euthanasia.

It was not until the 1980s that the religious right realised itself in Australia and New Zealand. One of its first expressions was the Logos Foundation in NSW started by a former New Zealand Baptist minister, Howard Carter.

It soon spread its influence in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's National Party in Queensland. It campaigned against a Bill of Rights and argued for "parent-controlled" Christian schools.

The 1990s

By the early 1990s the conservative Lyons Forum — a secretive Christian faction inside the Federal Coalition — formed to promote family values. Two key events in 1994 speak to its influence.

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It backed the “Say No To Sodomy” rallies in Tasmania in an ultimately unsuccessful bid to keep the state’s laws banning gay sex. The laws were finally repealed in 1997.

The Lyons Forum was also instrumental in removing the then Leader of the Opposition, John Hewson, who dared to publish a media release that year supporting the Gay Mardi Gras. This was the beginning of the Howard era.

In 1995, the fundamentalist Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) was formed. It continued where the Logos Foundation left off. Abortion is its central concern.

In 1996, John Howard became prime minister. He was soon met with the ACL and other fundamentalist groups. Since Howard, bible study meetings now regularly occur in the parliament, attended by members of most parties.

Despite this, the religious right is on the back foot. In the states, governments have reformed laws relating to abortion, censorship, prostitution, drugs and queer rights.

At a federal level, the battle for legalisation to the abortion related drug RU-486 was won even over the heads of Howard and the ACL. There have been significant changes to laws affecting gays, giving them financial equality with heterosexuals. However, gay marriage is still a major issue.

In 2008, the ACL invited Malcolm Turnbull to be the keynote speaker at their annual conference. To its surprise, Turnbull defended a woman’s right to choose and gay rights. So, to some extent, small ‘l’ liberalism is back, at least temporarily.

On its web page, the ACL claims victories concerning euthanasia, “R” rated computer games, gay adoption of children in the ACT and Tasmania, the placement of brothels, offensive advertising and a by-law to prohibit preaching in parks. If that’s all they can claim then they’re not exactly taking the country by storm.

Moral crusaders

The religious right is mainstream religion in drag. They use their money to grandstand on moral

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issues such as their current campaign to censor edgy TV programs.

They are always welcome in parliament, are on the religious tax-exempt gravy train, can influence the outcome of elections, but they don't always get what they want. Labor, Liberal and National politicians, whose central concern is their re-election, happily engage them for that purpose, mindful there are other constituencies they cannot alienate.

A different set of circumstances has seen the re-emergence of the religious right as a stronger force in the US. The situation in Australia is different, insofar as the population is significantly less religious. Successive censuses have shown a steady downward trend in religious belief.

In the not-too-distant future, religious belief in Australia should drop below 50%. This is likely to be the result at the next New Zealand census in 2011.

A problem is that despite the widespread indifference to religion, Australia and New Zealand remain constitutional monarchies, not republics. There is no constitutional separation of church and state to act as a check on governments funding religion with taxpayers' money.

[Max Wallace is Director of the Australia New Zealand Secular Association and author of *The Purple Economy: Supernatural Charities, Tax and the State.*]

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