

## **Are newspapers now the least trusted source of truth?**

This month's *TCFNews* explores some of the issues raised by the much proclaimed banning of SRE materials by the Department and the role the media played. For some time the community has been getting more anxious about the credibility of the media, newspapers in particular, to provide even an approximation of the truth as they continue to seek the sensational and catchy headline over any reasoned argument or even handed reporting. This is particular the case with religion in schools and the article *Banning books and other witchcraft* takes up this point and refers to arguments put by TCFNSW to the Department about an attempt to ban SRE materials.

John Gore

## **Banning books and other witchcraft**

Many TCF members would have been alarmed when they read in the Sydney Morning Herald last May a report alerting readers to Special Religious Education materials purported to present a distorted view of sex that was against Department policies. Even more disturbing was the memorandum from a senior Department officer requesting all principals to check if these materials were being used and if they were to instruct those SRE providers that they could not be used, effectively issuing a ban.

It turned out that one of the books had never been part of any program and that the others, by respected author John Dickson, were part of the Anglican church's program for secondary schools. The Anglicans met with the Department and these matters were resolved but I am sure one senior officer must have been given a huge boot in the backside for his overreaction to the newspaper story.

This incident involves a number of issues and TCFNSW wrote to the Department about some of them.

### **1. Media support for secular groups opposed to religion in schools.**

In recent years the SMH has been an ignorant supporter of sections of the community who want to ban religion, SRE in particular, in state schools. It provided strong support for those who proposed ethics classes in SRE time and has continued its support through opposition to the SRE enrolment form corrections and the promotion of news releases from groups that oppose religion in schools. It is not impartial and there have been no retractions of its misreporting or any attempt to provide space for counter arguments. The Fairfax media is not neutral when it comes to religion in schools and continues to support these groups and inadvertently the agenda of the NSW Greens and their spokesperson John Kaye.

### **2. Lack of understanding of the provisions of the Act for SRE**

The attempt to ban SRE resources shows the lack of understanding by some officers within the Department of the provisions for SRE. The content and pedagogy of SRE lessons have nothing to do with the Department. These are

matters entirely for the providers as indicated in the Department's own guidelines. *The religious education to be given is in every case to be the religious education authorised by the religious body to which the member of the clergy or other religious teacher belongs.* That a senior Department officer would seek to ban SRE materials is outrageous.

**3. Clarification of the activities of the review of SRE and SEE currently underway.**

The current review has within its terms of reference *7. Pedagogy, relevance, age appropriateness of teaching and learning in SRE across all Years K to 10 and teaching and learning in SEE in Year K to 6 in a variety of demographics.* The review can make its recommendations but again it is not for the Department to take up any comments or opinions from the review on this matter. TCFNSW reminded the Department that these matters were not its concern and if taken up would not go uncontested by the providers of SRE.

**4. Need for continued action**

All those with a continuing interest in SRE will need to hold the Government to account on its review intentions. It will be all too easy to inadvertently question or pose questions about the future of SRE despite this not being the focus of the review. Those who are anti religion in state schools will want to make the most out of the review findings and this will mean more media releases of a negative nature and newspapers like the SMH who have shown their lack of partiality will be quick to take a catchy headline.

All TCF members need to keep informed about these developments and ready to oppose the stream of prejudice that finds its way into the media.

John Gore

