

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 903
SCHOOL CHAPLAINS ARE NOT SCHOOL COUNSELLORS
THEY ENTANGLE CHURCH AND STATE**

Coalition MPs have urged [Scott Morrison](#) to increase funding to the government's school chaplaincy program to help address concerns that activism against global heating is causing mental health problems for Australian children.

DOGS believe that the Chaplaincy program contravenes Section 116 of the Constitution which prohibits the entanglement of church and state.

The [program, which offers about \\$20,000 each to 3100 schools to employ chaplains, has been controversial](#) since its introduction by the Howard government. An amended version continued under Labor, and it was redesigned again under Tony Abbott after two successful High Court challenges over the scope of the federal government's executive and constitutional power to fund religious guidance.

The federal government signed a four-year agreement with the states and territories in 2019 to spend \$245.7 million on school chaplains, with this year's May budget forecasting ongoing funding of \$61.4 million a year. Of this, \$11.3 million goes to NSW, \$12.8 million to Victoria, \$18.4 million to Queensland and \$7.7 million to Western Australia each year.

Queensland Liberal Andrew Wallace led the request in Tuesday's meeting to expand the chaplaincy program on the grounds the coronavirus pandemic was increasing mental health pressures on children and the scheme was one way to offer support.

The [Guardian](#) newspaper described the Coalition discussion as follows:

In the Coalition party room on Tuesday, Liberal MP Andrew Wallace compared children's fear of climate change with the threat of nuclear annihilation in the 1970s and 80s, and requested full funding for chaplains in every school to help ease concerns.

The assistant youth minister, Luke Howarth, has backed the call to expand the program in comments to Guardian Australia, saying climate activism is

“alarmist and does cause mental health problems for young people” that could be helped by chaplains.

Moderate Liberals interpret the push as preparation for increased funding to appease conservative party room members in the event the religious discrimination bill is stripped back.

The chaplaincy program provides \$20,000 to 3,100 schools towards the \$45,000 annual cost of a chaplain. It was [granted \\$247m over four years in the 2018 budget](#).

Wallace told the party room he had entered federal politics to improve mental health and tackle eating disorders, praising health minister Greg Hunt for his work in those areas.

Wallace spoke about growing up in the 1970s and 80s during the threat of nuclear annihilation, commenting that now children are afraid they will die in 10 years as a result of extinction from climate change.

He blamed groups lobbying for greater action on global heating including GetUp and Extinction Rebellion, saying warnings of the expected harms were “robbing children of hope”.

Wallace pleaded with the government to provide full funding for every school to have a chaplain in response to climate concern and the “shadow pandemic”, a reference to the mental health impact of Covid-19 and lockdowns.

Morrison responded that the chaplaincy program, which was [established by the Howard government in 2006](#) and [maintained by Labor in government](#), was a “signature program”.

Morrison noted annual funding was made permanent before the last election, and said the call to expand the program was an “interesting suggestion”.

The Coalition enjoyed an edge over Labor with religious voters at the 2019 election and is keen to wedge the opposition over the religious discrimination bill, to be introduced before the end of the year.

However, it currently faces a split in its own ranks with Liberals including Warren Entsch and Dave Sharma warning that aspects of the draft bill must be removed because they have become a sword, not a shield, for religious institutions to discriminate against others.

The chaplaincy program is highly controversial, particularly among secular groups that believe it inappropriately introduces religion into state schools, and the Australian Education Union which believes it should be replaced with counsellors and student wellbeing programs.

Howarth said chaplains make “a huge difference” in state schools particularly doing outreach with children “from broken families” and facing other “difficulties in their life”.

“I’m a big supporter of school chaplaincy,” he told Guardian Australia.

Howarth said there was no need to fully fund existing school chaplains, because he supports the current model of chaplains needing to fundraise to pay the remaining \$25,000 to support their place in a school.

“But there are new schools in growth areas that get no funding. We should continue to grow the chaplaincy program.”

Howarth said that young people’s highest priorities were mental health, the environment, security of work and jobs.

“I personally think, as assistant minister, that the language around climate change ... is alarmist and does cause mental health problems for young people – that’s a big concern.”

Howarth accused “Greens and Independents who hold Liberal seats” of talking down Australia’s achievements reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

“I talk about hope and that we are doing things. I don’t talk down the future of Australia and the globe.”

The Rationalist Society had this to say about the proposal:

Politicising chaplains

Conservative federal MPs want more money for the National Schools Chaplaincy Program so that chaplains could act as agents for government policy in the classroom. They say chaplains should alleviate students' fear of climate change, claiming it's "alarmist and does cause mental health problems." Other MPs recognise this as a tactic: they don't want a sh*t fight over the Religious Discrimination bill in parliament, so they're laying the groundwork for increasing funding for **religiously-trained troops** to indoctrinate the next generation of kids into climate-change-denial, which they can do without

changing legislation. Tricky, very tricky.

If they *really* wanted to **support young people's mental health**, they should fund mental health professionals. And provide support for parents who may struggle with their own issues trying to home-school their kids. In our Education section, an explanation of how to develop "well-being skills" in kids that will help them in lockdown: [self-organisation, autonomy](#) and [adaptability](#).

And from Chris Sidoti, Australia's former Human Rights Commissioner, a self-identified Catholic, a searing indictment of **Scott Morrison's version of Christianity**: "My trenchant criticism is not that he is using his office to implement Christian values but that he is *not* .. the basic issue is how Morrison understands Christianity .. some beliefs and values are mainstream Christianity, some are peripheral and some are over the edge .. his policies fail the tests of compassion, justice and love .. they are based on a Manichaeist view of the world as being irredeemably divided into good and evil, good people and bad people, good people who should be rewarded and bad people who should be punished, here and in the hereafter. Asylum seekers clearly fall into the latter group and so they'll be punished."

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