

## 2016/02: Should Australia adopt the Safe Schools Program?

### What they said...

*'They're intimidating children, they're bullying children and they're indoctrinating children into subscribing to a worldview that no 11 year old should be forced to do within our school system'*

Coalition Senator Cory Bernardi suggesting that the Safe Schools Program is coercing children into accepting a gay, lesbian and transgender worldview

*'Sadly, many of the people opposed to Safe Schools are opposed to diversity in general. They won't accept our LGBTIQ communities and seem to think that by sticking their heads in the sand they can make diversity, in terms of sexuality and gender identity, go away'*

New South Wales Greens Sexuality and Gender Identity spokesperson, Jenny Leong

### The issue at a glance

On February 22, 2016, the Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, ordered an investigation into the Safe Schools Program, a taxpayer-funded program aimed at helping lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and/or intersex (LGBTI) school students. The review of the program's materials is expected to be completed by March, 2016.

Critics of the Safe Schools Program, such as Coalition backbencher, Cory Bernardi, have claimed that it is a 'radical program' which is 'indoctrinating' children. Some Coalition MPs have been agitating against the program, saying it raises sexual issues which are inappropriate for teenagers and young children. Defenders of the program, such as Federal Labor shadow minister and gay rights advocate, Penny Wong, have argued that the program is supplying a necessary service in addressing discrimination against the LGBTI community

According to its website, the Safe Schools Coalition offers resources and support to equip staff and students with 'skills, practical ideas and greater confidence to create a safe and inclusive environment for same-sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, staff and families.'

### Background

(Most of the information found below was drawn from a Wikipedia entry titled 'Safe Schools Coalition Australia'. The full text of this entry can be accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safe\\_Schools\\_Coalition\\_Australia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safe_Schools_Coalition_Australia))

The Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) is a national coalition of organisations and schools formed to create safe and inclusive schools for students, families and staff who are same sex attracted, intersex and/or gender diverse. The focus of SSCA is on 'challenging bullying and discrimination' within school settings. They operate as part of the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), a body which researches youth-related issues and develops youth-support programs. SSCA is funded by the Australian and Victorian governments.

The program commenced in Victoria in 2010, and received national funding of \$8 million in 2013. It was formally launched in June 2014.

The program runs in every State and Territory of Australia except Northern Territory. As of mid February 2016, 490 schools are members of the program, and 86 organisations are supporters of the coalition.

In 2015, a teaching manual called 'All Of Us' was launched, following approval by the federal Education Department. Authors of the manual include Margot Fink, a finalist for Young Australian of the Year in 2016. The guide includes information on teaching gender diversity, sexual diversity and intersex topics. It includes a video of same sex attracted and gender diverse youth, as well as intersex film-maker Phoebe Hart.

In describing the aims of the program, the Safe Schools Coalition Australia reports that '75% of same sex attracted young people experience some form of homophobic abuse or bullying... A staggering 80% of young people experienced abuse and bullying while at school. Research on intersex Australians published in 2016 shows that, while 2% of Australians fail to complete secondary school, 18% of Australians born with intersex variations fail to do so due to issues around bullying, discrimination and pubertal medical interventions.

### Controversy around the program

The program has cross party support, including from education experts and peak bodies, Labor state governments, and government ministers, however, the program is opposed by some religious groups. Controversial aspects of the 'All Of Us' guide include 'encouraging students to defy teachers who do not let them put up posters or access gay websites'.

On 9 February 2016, The Australian newspaper reported claims that a "gay manual" was being pushed in schools. A spokesperson for the Australian Christian Lobby stated that the program pressured kids and "confuses them about their own identity". Kevin Donnelly, a senior research fellow at the Australian Catholic University has described the program as

'social engineering'.

However, on 14 February 2016 the education minister, Simon Birmingham, described the lessons prepared by the coalition as having 'reasonable objectives'. Birmingham stated that controversy over the program was 'very unhelpful because the debate that seems to be occurring in the public space is one of whether or not we should be teaching inclusiveness and tolerance in our schools'.

Advocates for the program point to high levels of homophobic abuse, including in school settings, and high levels of school leaving. The managing director of the Young and Well Co-operative Research Centre has described the curriculum material as necessary.

The program is under review by the Turnbull Coalition government after Coalition backbenchers Cory Bernardi and George Christensen raised concerns over the 'sexualised' nature of the program. Christensen also likened the program to a 'paedophile grooming a victim'.

### Internet information

The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) is the body under whose auspices the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA) operates.

FYA's Internet site has a section titled 'Fast Facts about Safe Schools Coalition Australia'.

The 'facts' address many of the criticism directed at the SSCA and the program it has developed.

These responses can be accessed at <https://www.fya.org.au/2016/02/12/fast-facts-about-safe-schools-coalition-australia/>

On March 9, 2016, The Brisbane Times published a comment by former Nationals Senator , Bill O'Chee, titled 'Safe Schools getting scrutiny it deserves'

The opinion piece is critical of the Safe Schools Coalition's program.

The full text of this comment can be accessed <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/comment/the-hermit/safe-schools-getting-scrutiny-it-deserves-20160309-gneczs.html>

On March 2, 2016, the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children issued a media release titled 'Every Child has a Right to be Safe at School'.

The release is a statement of support for the goals of the Safe Schools Program issued after the Turnbull government announced a review into its materials.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Media-release-safe-schools-program-Commissioner-for-Children.pdf>

On March 2, 2016, Your Life Choices published an opinion piece titled 'Giving kids the support they need'.

The piece supports the Safe Schools program.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <https://www.yourlifechoices.com.au/news/safe-schools-program-still-under-attack>

On February 26, 2016, The Conversation published a comment by Timothy W. Jones, Senior Lecturer in History at La Trobe University titled 'Safe Schools Coalition: what is the Christian Right afraid of?'

Wells traces the development of the Christian Right's pre-occupation with the different forms of sexual expression practised in Australia.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <https://theconversation.com/safe-schools-coalition-what-is-the-christian-right-afraid-of-55296>

On February 26, 2016, The New Matilda published an opinion piece by Lucy Watson titled 'Safe Schools Debacle Reveals Coalition's Juvenile Delinquents And High School Bullies'

Watson argues that those who oppose the Safe Schools Program are displaying homophobia.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <https://newmatilda.com/2016/02/26/safe-schools-debacle-reveals-coalitions-juvenile-delinquents-and-high-school-bullies/>

On February 25, 2016, the Australia First Party published an opinion piece expressing its wide-ranging opposition to the Safe Schools Program. The comment is titled 'Safe Schools mean keeping sexual deviance out of our classrooms' (Please note, the material adopts a very negative point of view, presenting same-sex orientation and transgender inclinations as 'deviant'.)

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://australiafirstparty.net/safe-schools-mean-keeping-sexual-deviance-out-of-our-classrooms/>

On February 24, 2016, New Matilda published an opinion piece by Max Chalmers titled 'The Anti-Gay Emails to MPs: Safe Schools Program Will "Destroy Civilisation"'

The purpose of the article and the published excerpts from emails is to demonstrate the prejudice of many of those who oppose the Safe Schools Program

The full text of the comment can be accessed at <https://newmatilda.com/2016/02/24/exclusive-anti-safe-schools-emails-to-mps-reveal-homophobia-and-confusion-among-programs-opponents/>

In February, 2015, Family Voice Australia sent an open letter to the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, protesting against the introduction of the Safe Schools Program into Australian schools.

The full text of the letter can be accessed at <http://www.fava.org.au/publications-access-notice/977>

On October 10, 2014, The Adelaide Advertiser published a series of letters expressing views on the Safe Schools Program. The letters represent a range of opinions. Some support the Program, others are opposed.

All letters can be accessed at <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/letters-to-the-editor-october-11/news-story/029a88f7c45e1b714e3c2c37c6698197>

Bully Zero Australia Foundation has a section of its Internet site devoted to homophobia and homophobic bullying. The site gives an indication of the extent of the problem.

Access to this information can be had at <http://bzaf.org.au/homophobic-bullying/>

The Australian Family Association has as one of its national campaigns a challenge to the Safe Schools Program. Its position and criticisms of the program can be accessed at <http://www.family.org.au/national-campaigns/420-political-and-narrow-anti-bullying-program-under-scrutiny>

### **Arguments against the Safe Schools Program**

1. The Safe Schools program focuses on a very small percentage of the student population

One of the reasons critics offer for the inappropriateness of the Program's focus is that it exaggerates the occurrence of same-sex-oriented and transgender children in school communities.

In a comment published on February 26, 2016, The Australia First Party stated, '[T]he producers of this propaganda claim that ten per cent of people are same-sex attracted and a further four per cent are transgender.

These figures stem from the discredited research of Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s and are not supported by either US or Australian statistics.

In fact, they overstate the truth by many multiples.'

A similar point is made by The Australian Family Association which notes on its Internet site, 'The National Safe Schools Framework excludes the overwhelming majority of students from its focus and protection. Most students are not same-sex attracted, intersex or gender diverse, yet the SSCA is focussed only on those students.'

The Australian Family Association has also quoted research figures intended to show the small minority of people who are either same-sex oriented or transgender. The Association's Internet site cites research conducted by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) at La Trobe University. The Association notes, 'Australia's largest ever sex survey in 2000-2003 of almost 20,000 people, revealed that 1.2% of adults identified as homosexual (gay or lesbian).'

The Association further states, 'To break this down further: among men, 1.6% identified as gay or homosexual; among women, 0.8% identified as lesbian; 0.9% of men identified as bisexual; 1.4% of women identified as bisexual. The researchers concluded that "Relatively few Australians reported a sexual identity other than heterosexual."

The Australian Family Association has also cited other research looking at sexual preference among children and young people. 'Another study conducted in Victoria by the Victorian ALP Government in 2008, found that among those aged 12 to 24 years, 97.9% identified as heterosexual, 1.5% as bisexual, and 0.6% as homosexual.'

2. It does not address the majority of causes of bullying

Opponents of the Safe Schools program have claimed that the causes of bullying are much more wide-ranging than those the program addresses. Family Voice Australia claims, 'The vast majority of school children who are regularly bullied because of their body shape or size, school grades, race or ethnic background, religious beliefs or family income - as shown by a study of 105,000 students.'

Family Voice Australia concludes, 'All students deserve a safe school environment, but the Safe Schools Coalition program is not the way to achieve it. Emphasising homosexual bullying tells other bullied students that the reasons they are mocked or abused are not as important, deepening their sense of injustice and despair.'

A similar point of view is presented by The Australian Family Association which notes on its Internet site, 'This is not the best way to deal with bullying and mental health issues experienced by school children. The SSCA program is not inclusive; it is focussed on same-sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students. It is based on a premise that the sexual identity is the cause for the student being bullied... Yet all students who are bullied, for whatever reason, deserve support and protection.

Anti-bullying programs that work place the focus on zero tolerance for ANY reason.'

The Australian Family Association has further stated, 'Research shows that bullying on the grounds of same-sex attraction, intersex or gender identity is not one of the most common reasons for bullying.'

The Association cites Canadian research findings from 2006 which state in priority order the following bases for bullying: 'Body image 38% [27%], grades or marks 17% [12%], cultural or racial background 11% [14%], language 7% [7%], gender 6% [4%], religion 5% [5%], income 5% [5%]).'

Some extreme critics of the program have suggested that not only does it not address the type of bullying most students

encounter, its supposed labelling of those that do not accept its tolerant outlook toward gay, lesbian and transgender children as 'homophobic' constitutes potential bullying of the majority of students. Senator Cory Bernardi has stated that the program 'bullies heterosexual children into submission to the gay agenda'.

### 3. The program does not treat children claiming to be homosexual with sufficient caution

Critics of the Same Sex Program are concerned that it may consolidate the belief among some young people that they have a same-sex orientation when this is, in fact, only a stage in their sexual development.

Family Voice Australia has stated, 'Sexual attraction is particularly unstable in adolescents. Authoritative United States and New Zealand studies indicate that between the ages of 16 and 26 some 80% of same-sex attracted boys and girls become opposite-sex attracted as adults. The common claim that sexual attraction is unchangeable is a myth.' The New Zealand study cited by Family Voice Australia summarised its results in this manner, 'These findings show that much same-sex attraction is not exclusive and is unstable in early adulthood, especially among women.'

Family Voice Australia concluded, 'Puberty is an emotional time for many students who are still developing their sense of identity, and focusing attention on homosexuality is unhelpful at this time. Most teens that experience same-sex attraction become opposite-sex attracted in adulthood. They should not be falsely led to believe that their adolescent attractions are necessarily fixed and permanent. Students with current same-sex attractions should not be encouraged to embrace activity linked with serious health risks.'

Critics of the program argue that it is an inappropriate imposition on children who are too young to be exposed to such material. Greg Donnelly, a Labor Party member of the NSW Legislative Council, has been cited as claiming, 'We are talking about little boys and girls, who are in effect a captured audience, being presented with overt sexual and gender ideology that is being presented as a matter of fact.'

It has also been claimed that the program does not treat children claiming to be transgender with sufficient caution. The Safe Schools Coalition has been accused of promoting material which encourages children and young people to make decisions about their gender identity which are ill-founded and premature.

Former National party senator, Bill O'Chee, has stated, 'The Safe Schools Coalition pushes a book for children aged four called "The Gender Fairy". In an absurd example of gender stereotyping, a little girl is encouraged to think she is transgender simply because she likes to play soccer.'

Among the most extreme criticisms made of the Safe Schools Program are that its materials seek to 'indoctrinate' children and win them over to a gay, lesbian or transgender orientation. It is also claimed that the program links children with groups whose members may try to sexually exploit them.

### 4. The program ignores parents' values and usurps their role

It has been argued that information about sexuality, particularly material in relation to gender identity and sexual orientations are highly personal matters best dealt with by a child's parents within the family home.

In an opinion piece published in The Herald Sun on March 2, Michael Sukkar, the Federal MP for Deakin and Tim Smith, the Victorian Liberal MP for Kew, stated, 'In the guise of an anti-bullying course, the so-called Safe Schools teaching materials present children with confronting and manipulative information. That information is often at odds with the values those children are taught at home.'

Sukkar and Smith further claim, 'Parental consent will not be sought by the state government before this curriculum is taught in their children's school.'

In fact, parents will not be advised of any detail of the contents of the Safe Schools program despite its fiercest proponent, Premier Andrews, telling parliament "it does push the boundaries sometimes".'

Smith and Sukkar concluded, 'Ultimately, we believe that the state should not usurp the role of parents and make value judgements about what children are to be compulsorily taught.'

Particularly on these highly sensitive subjects, without their parents' consent and knowledge... We are determined to be the voice for mainstream values and to defend the rights of ordinary parents to guide the values of their children on these highly sensitive matters.

Dan Flynn, the Victorian director of Australian Christian Lobby, has also stated that the program undermines the authority of parents to educate their own children about 'sensitive and contested sexual matters.'

Mr Flynn has further stated, 'Most parents would be very concerned to know that their children are being exposed to such content at school.'

The program should be removed from schools, and the government should replace it with anti-bullying resources not based on radical gender theory.'

It would appear that many parents do not want their children taught about transgender and sexual orientation issues at school. In a letter published in The Adelaide Advertiser on October 10, 2014, Trevor Dawes stated, 'A recent Galaxy Poll, found that 64 per cent of the Australian public are opposed to the teaching of GLBTI (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex) issues in kindergartens and schools.'

### 5. The Safe Schools Program is a misuse of government funding and of schools' resources

Critics have claimed that the Safe Schools Program is an inappropriate priority for both governments and schools, especially at a time when academic achievement levels in Australia are falling relative to many other nations.

An opinion piece published on The Australia First Party's Internet site on February 26, 2016, stated, 'At a time when too many of our schools are failing to maintain teaching standards, when the literacy and numeracy rates of students are falling, when demands for school funds climb ever higher, why would any government even contemplate supporting such

a desperate political agenda targeting our school children?'

Criticising the eight million dollars of federal funding made over to the Safe Schools Program, the Australia First Party claims, 'This is at a time when literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills in Australia's youth are well below the First World OECD average...

Currently, according to Australia's Bureau of Statistics, 3.7% (620,000) of Australians aged 15 to 74 years have literacy skills at Below Level 1, a further 10% (1.7 million) at Level 1, 30% (5.0 million) at Level 2, 38% (6.3 million) at Level 3, 14% (2.4 million) at Level 4, and 1.2% (200,000) at Level 5.

As for numeracy, the figures are somewhat lower. Up to 6.5% (1.1 million) of Australians had numeracy skills at Below Level 1, 15% (2.5 million) at Level 1, 32% (5.4 million) at Level 2, 31% (5.2 million) at Level 3, 11% (1.8 million) at Level 4 and 1.4% (230,000) at Level 5.

And yet ideological politicians like self-interested Penny Wong seem hell-bent on funding deviant sex education in our schools.'

The Australia First Party also cites a senior research fellow at the Australian Catholic University, Mr Kevin Donnelly, who helped review Australia's national curriculum for the Liberal Coalition government in 2015. Mr Donnelly is cited arguing, 'Teachers are increasingly expected to take over from what families traditionally have done. Schools and teachers need to focus on the key disciplines, the basics, and that means more education and not as much social engineering.'

### **Arguments in favour of the Safe Schools Program**

1. The Safe Schools Program has been developed by specialist educators

Defenders of the Safe School program note that it was developed by specialist educators and was thoroughly trialled before being released.

The Safe Schools Program was produced under the umbrella of the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA). Included in the FYA's programs are Worlds of Work (a program designed to help make young people work-ready); Young Social Pioneers (a program designed to foster community engagement among young people); Indigenous Programs (a suite of programs aimed at empowering young Indigenous Australians) and Project Propeller (a project designed to help motivate young Australians to achieve their goals).

Defenders of the Safe School program argue that rather than being prompted by a narrow interest of a special interest group, like gay and lesbian Australians, FYA has been running for 30 years and is supported by governments, large and small businesses, corporate Australia and the social sector. The organisation is involved in problem research and program design.

The 'All of US' unit guide is an evidence-based classroom resource written by teachers, curriculum experts and the Safe Schools Coalition Australia team. Melbourne teacher Christopher Bush in collaboration with Victorian and national Safe Schools Coalition staff members and curriculum consultant Janice Atkin, formerly of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) developed the resource.

As part of its development, 'All of Us' was carefully tested and trialled with focus groups of teachers and with students in classrooms to ensure that All Of Us provides a teacher-friendly tool kit that will make schools safer and more inclusive not just for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, but for their friends, teachers and family too.

'All of Us' was carefully prepared to be aligned with and age-appropriate for the Year 7/8 Health and Physical Education learning area of the Australian Curriculum.

It was trialled with students and teachers of Years 7 and 8. It is recommended specifically for use with those year levels. A curriculum consultant was also used to ensure the resource's appropriateness to those year levels.

2. Participation in the Safe Schools Program is voluntary

Defenders of the Safe School Program argue that it is not an initiative forced on schools, but one that schools choose to adopt in response to what they perceive as problems within their schools.

An opinion piece published in Your Life Choices on March 2, 2016, stated, 'Considering that schools can choose whether to opt-in to the program and choose which services to include, I see no reason why it should be cut. Additionally, parents who take umbrage to particular content can always have their child omitted from the program.'

The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), the body which designed the Safe Schools Program, has stressed that the program adopts an open, non-coercive approach and that no attempt to made to force students to hold particular views. FYA states, 'The resource does not suggest teachers force students to explain why they hold a different view in front of the class and teacher, nor to coach them to alter their views. Students are simply asked to discuss and explore a range of questions that are designed to encourage them to think about being in someone else's shoes. The discussions encourage understanding and empathy for the experiences of others - promoting messages of inclusion and belonging for all.'

FYA has also stressed that no school is required to take up the program. FYA states, 'The program is available nationwide, offering resources and support for teachers, students and school communities at the discretion of individual schools.'

FYA note that even in Victoria, where all government schools will be required to trial the program 'membership to Safe Schools remains voluntary... and schools will not be compelled to join or to use any specific resources.'

3. The Safe Schools Program meets a real need

Supporters of the Safe Schools Program stress that homosexual and transgender children, as minority groups within Australian society, have particular psychological issues and are at an increased risk of being bullied. According to this

view, though gay, lesbian and transgender children are a small in number within school communities, their experience of bullying is very severe.

On March 2, 2016, the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children, Mark Morrissey, stated, 'Young people who are same-sex attracted are at much greater risk of being bullied on the basis of their sexuality. Also children and young people are often bullied because of their parent's sexuality.'

In an opinion piece published in *The New Matilda* on February 26, 2016, Lucy Watson stated, 'In 2016, people are still bashed for being queer. 80 per cent of young LGBT people report experiencing homophobia, and 18 per cent of that is physical.'

Research published on the Zero Bully Australia Foundation Internet site presents a similar picture. The site states, 'Research into young people's experiences of homophobia and transphobia show that 61% of same sex attracted or gender diverse young people in Australia have experienced verbal abuse; 18% of same sex attracted or gender diverse young people in Australia have experienced physical abuse [and] 80% of these homophobic and transphobic incidents take place in schools.'

Because so much of this bullying occurs at school, supporters of the Safe School Program further note that not only is there a need to teach tolerance in regard to same sex oriented and transgender children, school is an appropriate place in which to encourage such acceptance.

In a letter to the editor published in *The Adelaide Advertiser* on October 10, 2014, Joan Scott stated, 'Discrimination against people whose sexual orientation is outside the mainstream is alive and well in our society.

If we don't teach children in schools about tolerance of those who hold views different from their own, where should they learn it?

At home, one hopes, but clearly not all parents are capable of passing on values of tolerance and equality.'

The program's supporters also note the severe consequences of such gender-related bullying.

The Coalition Government's Federal Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, has stated, 'Far too many young people are being bullied and marginalised. Many to such an extent, that they leave school early and develop mental health problems including self-harm and suicide.'

Suicide Prevention Australia notes, 'Suicide and self-harm in GLBT communities remains an issue of serious concern in Australia. Available research continues to demonstrate that the prevalence and rates of self-harm and attempted suicide are significantly higher amongst GLBT people than among non-GLBT populations - though the prevalence of completed suicide statistics remains unknown.'

Supporters of the Safe School Program argue that gay, lesbian and transgender children have the same rights to fair and equal treatment regardless of their frequency within the general community.

The Tasmanian Commissioner for Children, Mark Morrissey, has stated, 'As the Commissioner for Children I am an advocate for all Tasmanian children and young people. And this includes this particular group of young people.

These students should be accorded all of the rights to which they are entitled; including the right to education on the basis of equal opportunity, and respect without discrimination of any kind.'

#### 4. The Safe School Program does not aim to indoctrinate children or recruit them to homosexuality or a transgender sexual identity

Defenders of the Safe Schools Program argue that its purpose is not to indoctrinate children or recruit them to one or other sexual orientation or gender identity, but to promote respect and acceptance of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

In an opinion piece published in *The New Matilda* on February 26, 2016, Lucy Watson stated, 'The only thing the Safe Schools Coalition [hopefully] indoctrinates kids into is acceptance. It's a program that will help fight structural homophobia at its core by teaching kids that gay people exist, that you can't ignore them, and you shouldn't demonise them.'

On March 2, 2016, the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children, Mark Morrissey, stated, '[I]t is unfortunate that this program has been so heavily criticised as one which promotes and endorses same-sex attraction amongst children. The fact is that some young people are same-sex attracted, and are bullied because of it. Who they are is often misunderstood or not respected by their peers, their families, or other significant adults in their lives.'

The Commissioner further stated, 'We have a responsibility to these children to ensure they feel safe, are accepted and valued, and are free to be themselves at school.'

The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), the body under whose auspices the Safe Schools Program was designed, has stressed that its aim is to promote empathy and understanding, not to indoctrinate or coerce agreement.

On its Internet site FYA states, 'The resource does not suggest teachers force students to explain why they hold a different view in front of the class and teacher, nor to coach them to alter their views. Students are simply asked to discuss and explore a range of questions that are designed to encourage them to think about being in someone else's shoes.'

#### 5. Some of the criticism of the Safe Schools Program appears to be motivated by prejudice and a lack of respect for gay, lesbian and transgender individuals

Defenders of the program have noted that some of its critics have exhibited extreme prejudice and seem to be motivated by a rejection of the very existence of gay, lesbian and transgender people.

In an opinion piece published in *The New Matilda* on February 26, 2016, Lucy Watson stated, 'These Liberal politicians can accuse Shorten, and everyone else, of bullying them, but the only bullies in this situation are themselves - and the

school bullies they enable by publicly demonising Australia's queer youth.'

It has been noted that some of the language used to describe the program and those it seeks to protect and empower has been very immoderate.

On March 2, 2016, the Tasmanian Commissioner for Children, Mark Morrissey, stated, 'I am concerned at the damage that may be may be incurred on these young people, by the less than measured language being used by critics of the program.'

On February 24, 2016, New Matilda published excerpts from some of the emails sent to federal MPs urging opposition to the Safe Schools Program. The excerpts were published because of the prejudice they seem to demonstrate. The following are some of the comments quoted. One correspondent wrote, 'Do not allow these funds to be use for the advancement and propagation of gay lesbian agenda. We do not want our children to adopt these unnatural habits.' Another stated, 'Please note, I am not homophobic. That implies a fear. That would be like saying I'm lie-aphobic. Or treat-your-parents-disrespectfully-aphobic. Or steal-aphobic. Or murder-aphobic. I just believe homosexual behaviour is wrong.'

A spokesperson from Greens MLC David Shoebridge's office was reported as having told New Matilda the office had received well over 2,000 emails since October 2015, many of which exhibited extreme prejudice.

Labor MLC Penny Sharpe told New Matilda that she had been sent 'hundreds' of such emails and that they were 'at best misinformed, at worst homophobic and transphobic, and deliberately misleading.'

New South Wales Greens Sexuality and Gender Identity spokesperson, Jenny Leong, has accused the Australian Christian Lobby of running a misinformation campaign.

Leong has stated, 'Sadly, many of the people opposed to Safe Schools are opposed to diversity in general. They won't accept our LGBTIQ communities and seem to think that by sticking their heads in the sand they can make diversity, in terms of sexuality and gender identity, go away. They need to realise that being gay, being transgender, being intersex, being a child in a same-sex family, are all very real experiences and very normal experiences that should be celebrated, not condemned or ignored.'

### Further implications

It would appear that conservative Christian views continue to exert a significant influence on the Coalition government. Malcolm Turnbull came to the prime ministership as an apparently more liberal alternative to the former Prime Minister, Tony Abbott. Interestingly, Mr Turnbull has not been able to put a less conservative agenda in place.

Rather than immediately putting legislation before parliament to amend the Marriage Act to recognise same-sex marriages, Mr Turnbull has retained Tony Abbott's delaying process of holding a plebiscite after the election. Mr Turnbull has promised that if the Coalition is elected he will hold the plebiscite and direct his Party members to vote in accord with the results of the referendum. However, Mr Turnbull has not been prepared to commit himself to how soon after the election the plebiscite will be held.

Other members of his party have stated that for them abiding by the results of the plebiscite could mean voting in accord with the position their particular electorate supported in the referendum. For some this would allow a 'No' vote despite the fact that the country as a whole is likely to have voted 'Yes'.

What this indicates is that gay rights, especially marriage rights, are a divisive issue within the Coalition. Tony Abbott was removed by the Coalition and replaced by Malcolm Turnbull because the government believed that Mr Abbott was an electoral liability. Mr Abbott's conservatism was a significant part of what had made him damaging electorally.

The difficulty for Mr Turnbull is that much of his Party is socially more conservative than the majority of the electorate. For Mr Turnbull the challenge is to retain an impression of liberalism to keep favour with voters while not causing a schism within his party. Same-sex marriage is an issue that could cause such a split.

The Safe Schools Program is shaping up as a trial run for the same-sex marriage debate. The Safe Schools Program initially had bi-partisan support in the federal parliament. The program was funded by Labor before it left office in 2013 but was officially launched in 2014, after Mr Abbott had already become prime minister. Mr Abbott did not scrap the program when he was leader of the Liberal Party.

Now Mr Abbott has joined those conservative Liberals calling for the Safe Schools Program's abolition. In doing so, he and others like Cory Bernardi are putting Mr Turnbull on notice to declare his conservative credentials. As with same-sex marriage, Mr Turnbull appears to have taken a step to the side. Rather than either endorsing the Safe Schools Program or moving to scrap its funding, he has ordered a review. The review is expected to be completed in March, 2016.

Whatever its findings, the review allows Mr Turnbull to use them to justify the decision that is finally taken and so avoid personal responsibility for it.

The regrettable consequence of this development is that the wellbeing of gay, lesbian and transgender children may well have become a secondary consideration to juggling for votes and forming political alignments.

**Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline** The Australian: February 13, 2016, page 22, comment by Angela Shanahan, 'Bullying message lost in all the rainbow flag-waving'.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/angela-shanahan/bullying-message-lost-in-all-the-lgbti-rainbow-flagwaving/news-story/ba654c044fedc2093a576c3a21e8e61d>

The Australian: February 13, 2016, page 17, comment by Natasha Bitá, 'Sexual politics in the classroom'.

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