

Progressive Atheists Inc.

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Proud Member of Atheist Alliance International

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Secularism in the Modern World

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Guest Speaker

Lev Lafayette

President of the Victorian Secular Lobby

The Political Imperative of Secularism

In a sense, everyone is secular. The word 'secular' comes from the Medieval Latin "secularis", meaning worldly or temporal in distinction to the eternal. However not everyone is a secularist, or advocates secularism. These are political positions which advocate the separation of government institutions, persons, and policy from those religious institutions and their policy. Secularism is a political position that is "aggressively neutral" on matters of metaphysical speculation, which both protects and limits religious organisations as being equal to any other voluntary association deserving of neither fear nor favour. As the famous advocate and the person who coined the term, George Holyoake, pointed out secularism isn't an argument against religious beliefs, but an argument independent of it. Everyone is secular; not everyone, alas, is a secularist.

As a result, there is a mixture of people who fall under the 'secularist' label. It includes people utterly sincere in their faith and personal beliefs, but also deeply opposed to those very same beliefs being established as universal law enforced on others against their will. It excludes those rationalists, skeptics, humanists, and atheists who, in criticising faith-based perspectives also oppose the organisational independence of such organisations, or wish to impose specific legislative restrictions on bodies or individuals who express a particular faith. A particular contemporary example would include those who propose immigration restrictions on Muslims or planning restrictions against mosques. These are anti-secularist policies.

A question may be asked, and often is among my politically active colleagues, why does secularism have a particular priority. The reason is that secularism is necessary and increasingly so for a modern and global society; it is impossible to conduct open investigation and reflexive development in the sciences, arts, or laws, from the multiplicity of cultural perspectives and knowledges, with a religious censor instituted in the process. This is not to suggest that modernity does not have its own form of political censorship; it most certainly does, whether inspired by a state atheism or majoritarian democracy. Secularism represents a necessary but not sufficient condition of civil rights and liberties.

So whilst many religious believers may be secularists today, there is still a very active group of fundamentalists who would delight in the opportunity to move towards a more theocratic society. This also gives recognition to a very important element in the politics of secularism; that the division

in law is one of a continuum and a continually contested field. For some, the answer is a domination of the majority over the minority. This form of authoritarianism, despite a high level of populism, is hopelessly inadequate for international economic integration and development. An suggested alternative has been the institution of parallel legal systems, what some have called incorrectly "post-secularism", when it is really a society of multiple theocracies. A third alternative, effectively state-enforced atheism, engages in a profound and discriminatory injustice when it does not make what are effectively aesthetic allowances for people of a variety of faiths.

We started as an unincorporated association in 2010, and in 2011 decided to become an incorporated association. We are a lobby group, not a political party (secularism is a "broad tent", which includes a variety of perspectives on political economy, for example). We mainly organise meetings with politicians and political parties to discuss various items of policy, organise activities in cooperation with like-minded groups, engage in campaigns during elections, and provide a compiled resource of related news items. Our membership, and committee, represents a secular viewpoint with varying metaphysical perspectives being represented; atheist, Christian, pantheist etc.

Our policy positions as decided from the 2014 Annual General Meeting (and updated at 2015) are found at the following URL (<http://victoriansecular.org/policies>). In the 2014 state election campaign, we identified the following as priority issues and consistent with our policies: (a) Special Religious Instruction, (b) Equal Opportunity Act Amendments, (c) Abortion Reform Act of 2008. and (d) Racial and Religious Tolerance Act of 2001. In the coming year we are concentrating on the Equal Opportunity Act amendments, along with voluntary euthanasia, as these have been identified as the major secular issues that will be confronting the Victorian parliament. We will also support the Australian-wide secular coalition to deal more effectively with Federal issues.

Our capacity is limited by a modest membership and finances. We certainly lack the resources and lobbying power of groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby, the Catholic Education Office, or the National Civic Council (to cite three powerful organisations with demonstrably anti-secular policies). Nevertheless we do "punch above our weight" with well-established and improving political contacts. We also have an advantage that the policies we hold are typically supported by the majority of Australians, and with good reason as well. We are also limited to being a Victorian association; most of our energy is directed to Victorian-specific issues, however we are members of the Secular Coalition of Australia.

Politicians by their nature are timid creatures, most easily swayed by threats of well-financed and well-organised lobby groups. Whilst the majority of people support secular principles in our political system, as numerous opinion polls testify, our politicians are well out-of-step of what the public thinks. Only through an organised secular lobby can we create a situation, as it always has been, where the people lead and the politicians follow.

*This presentation is also published on the Victorian Secular Lobby Inc. website:
<http://victoriansecular.org/node/640>*

Many thanks to all our sponsors, supporters, members and friends, and all of our guest speakers who volunteered their time to make this conference a success.



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