

# Progressive Atheists Inc.

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## Secularism in the Modern World

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Guest Speaker

Roslyn Ives

### Freethought activity in Australia: From margins to mainstream

#### Introduction

There has been organised secular freethought activity in Australia since the mid-1800s. The many groups that formed and then mostly petered out have used a range of names – more on those below.

Though very few groups consolidated into anything with much public profile, secular freethinkers have been moving from the margins to the mainstream as increasing numbers of Australians are turning away from religion. Already 'no-religion' is the second biggest category, after Catholic, on the 5-yearly Census. And the recently announced change to the 'religion question' in the Census for next year, whereby

- the 'no religion' response has been moved from bottom to the top of the question, should result in a further rise in the numbers marking 'no religion'.

This change didn't just happen. Humanists and others have been lobbying the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for decades and can lay claim to having influenced this change, by writing submissions and talking with ABS officials, setting out objections to the structure of the Census religion question. We've made a difference.

#### Secular freethought activity in Australia

Freethought activity in Australia has tended to follow what is going on elsewhere, particularly the UK.

By the 1800s people were increasingly informed by ideas from science, the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions and thinkers like Thomas Paine – author of *Rights of Man* (1791), and two very influential pamphlets, *Common Sense* (1776) and *The Age of Reason* (1793-4).

In the UK, by 1840s and 50s a few activists were spruiking freethought ideas, holding meetings, forming groups, putting out magazines etc. [As an aside -- these early freethinkers were not mainstream, but rather seen as part of a ratbag fringe, shunned by 'polite' society, but that's a while other story.]

One well known secularist – meaning known in far-away Australia – was **Charles Bradlaugh** (1833–1891) the 'champion of liberty'. He's an example of what freethought activism can achieve.

- In 1866 he founded the **National Secular Society**, among other actions.

But perhaps he is best remembered for achieving the right to affirm.

- In 1880 he was elected as a MP for seat of Northampton but was not able to take his seat in parliament because he wanted to affirm rather than swear an oath of allegiance.
- He was repeatedly elected until finally in 1886, a parliamentary Select committee allowed him to affirm and take his seat.
- In 1888 he secured passage of a new Oaths Act enshrining in law the right to affirm. Hooray!

Freethought activity in Australia can be divided into three main periods based on preferred words. First, the 'secular' era. Second, the 'rationalist' era. Third, the 'humanist' era.

## 1. The secular era approx. 1850 – 1900

During this period groups typically called themselves 'secular' or 'freethought', and occasionally 'progressive' and/or 'spiritualist'. In all 30 + groups have been identified.

One example is the **Australasian Secular Association** formed in 1882. It was modelled on the **National Secular Society** of the UK. Most of its activities were centred on Melbourne which had already an established tradition of radical and secular activity, with publications being available through Coles Book Arcade run by freethinker Edward William Cole. Contributors include the well-known author Marcus Clarke (*For the Term of his Natural Life*).

When the **Australasian Secular Society** asked Charles Bradlaugh to send a representative of the NSS, **Joseph Symes** was chosen. He arrived in Melbourne in 1884. As well being a public speaker and quite a militant firebrand, he founded and edited a monthly magazine called *Liberator*, which ceased publication in 1904 when Symes returned to UK.

Once Australian freethinkers became aware of the UK publication *The Freethinker*, established 1881, some of them became subscribers.

In the late 1890s – depression hit Melbourne and other parts, depressing secular activities.

## 2. The Rationalist era 1900 – 1950

With most of the existing groups in disarray, the interest of freethinkers was drawn to publications put out by the **Rationalist Press Association**, which was formed in London in 1899. Best known for publishing small books series the **Thinker's Library**, along with a regular monthly magazine that went through a number of name changes over the years, eventually becoming the *New Humanist* in 1972.

Through this period the most typically name for active freethought groups/societies was 'Rationalist', with the occasional use of 'secular' and 'freethought'. Around 24 + groups have been identified.

The main ones being

- 1906 the Rationalist Ass of Victoria
- 1910 the Rationalist Ass of NSW
- 1914 Queensland Rationalist and Ethical Society.  
First World War
- 1918 Rationalist Ass of WA and Rationalist Ass of SA (1918).

These Rationalist groups met to discuss books and articles. They held public meetings, published magazines and tended to argue and dispute the veracity of religion and promote the virtues of rational thinking especially science.

### 3. The Humanist era from 1960s

In the immediate post WWII period as thinking people reflected on the horrors of the war with the incarceration and murder of 6 million Jews, and others such as gypsies and homosexuals. Many considered Christianity to be in a state of 'moral bankruptcy'. There was an urge to cast religion aside and structure groups in an entirely secular way. This led to the formation in 1945 of the United Nation with entirely secular aims.

Some of the same people involved in the formation of the UN called for the need for a secular, ethical alternative to religion. Over 200 delegates met in Amsterdam 1952 and agreed to form an organisation – the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), and after much discussion agreed on 'Humanism' and 'humanist' as the best freethought names. Many existing freethought groups from around the world affiliated with IHEU. And new groups using 'Humanist' were formed, including in Australia.

IHEU has non-government status at the UN and now has affiliated groups in over 140 countries.

#### Humanist societies in Australia

- 1960 the Sydney Humanist Group was formed.
- 1961 the Humanist Society of Victoria formed through the auspices of the Melbourne Unitarian Church and the Rationalist Association of Australia.
- 1962 the Humanist Society of SA was formed by the coming together of individuals who belonged to interstate or overseas humanist or rationalist groups.
- 1964 the Canberra Humanist Society and the Sydney Humanist Group changed its name to Humanist Society of NSW.
- 1965 the Humanist Society of WA was formed and the separate state-based societies affiliated into a national body the Council of Australian Humanist Societies or CAHS.
- In 1967 what had been a Rationalist Society in Queensland, by agreement with members changed its name to the Humanist Society of Queensland.

Humanists were active lobbyists on a range of issues such as access to contraceptives, safe abortions, no fault divorce, homosexual law reform, the right to voluntary euthanasia, among many other human rights issues.

Recognising the forward-thinking step made in 1973 by the then Attorney-General, Lionel Murphy, who set up the Civil Celebrant program Australian Humanists then put in place their annual Australian Humanist of the Year (AHOY) award, making Lionel Murphy the first recipient in 1983. Others AHOYs have included Phillip Adams, Fred Hollows, Peter Singer, Eva Cox, Lyn Allison, Tim Flannery, Peter Cundall, Jane Caro and Geoffrey Robertson.

From 1960 to the present Humanist Societies have continued to be active, with meetings, publications and submissions, but more recently 'atheism' as a preferred word for secular freethought groups has seen the development of atheist groups.

## In summary

1. The first period of secular activity didn't leave that many notable changes on society. And disappointingly they were not able to prevent the Australian Constitution, at federation, including the words 'under almighty god', when the early drafts based on the USA Constitution made no mention of 'god'
2. Two Rationalist organisations continued up until the now period namely the Victorian-based Rationalist Society of Australia and the Rationalist Ass of NSW. Their continued existence is explained by having the benefits of a large bequest (Vic) and owning property (NSW).

In conclusion please can we have more of these sorts of gatherings, where we secular freethinkers combine our efforts and energy so our views and interests are mainstream not just on the margins.

## References:

*Secular Who's Who*, Ray Dahlitz, 1992.

*The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, Prometheus Books, 1985.

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