

## **Digest of NRM News in Australia**

March 2013

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For comments, questions, or corrections please email compiler.

My thanks to Eileen Barker for alerting me to the Jehovah's Witness stories below and to Massimo Introvigne and Jean-Francois Mayer for their corrections and additions regarding last month's post on the Order of St. Charbel.

March was another relatively quiet month on the Australian NRM front, though not without some interesting stories regarding the Church of Scientology, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (i.e. the Exclusive Brethren, Raven-Taylor-Symington-Hales Brethren). Most interestingly, however, has been Senator Nick Xenophon, who has renewed his calls (rejected by the Australian government in 2010) for the establishment of a French-style federal cult-Watch body.

### **Senator Xenophon.**

Since being first elected to the Senate in late 2007 (his term began in mid-2008) South Australian independent Nick Xenophon has been involved in a number of high-profile controversies in which he has used the Westminster doctrine of parliamentary privilege to attack the Church of Scientology and to publicly name Roman Catholic Monsignor Ian Dempsey as a pedophile and accused Monsignor David Cappo and Archbishop of Adelaide Philip Wilson of covering up the sexual abuse of the now Traditional Anglican Archbishop John Hepworth when he was a Roman Catholic seminarian during the 1960s (a subsequent internal investigation by QC Michael Abbott found the allegations against Cappo, Wilson and Dempsey to be 'without substance'). Most recently he has made headlines for his clashes with the Malaysian government who recently deported him as an "enemy of the state" for his criticism of their electoral system and treatment of political dissidents.

As a bit of background, since 2009 Senator Xenophon has been a vocal critic of the Church of Scientology and other alleged 'cults,' appearing frequently on tabloid television programs, raising the issue a number of times in the Australian Senate, and hosting European visitors like Tom Sackville (FECRIS) and Georges Fenech (MIVILUDES). He has even become the subject of a number of amusing Internet memes.

In 2010 the Senate Economics Legislation Committee held public hearings into Senator Xenophon's proposed private member's bill (*Tax Laws Amendment (Public Benefit Test) Bill 2010*) calling for the implementation of a Public Benefit Test on charities which would measure their contribution to the wider community and their potential or actual harm against current and former members. The Committee's findings recommended the establishment of an Australian Charities Commission, since established in 2012 as the Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission (ACNC), as well as the following:

The Committee recommends that the Attorney-General's Department provide a report to the Committee on the operation of Miviludes and other law enforcement agencies overseas tasked with monitoring and controlling the unacceptable and /or illegal activities of cult -like organisations who use psychological pressure and breaches of general and Industrial law to maintain control over Individuals. The report should advise on the effectiveness of Miviludes and other similar organisations, given issues that need to be addressed to develop an international best practice approach for dealing with cult -like behaviour.

In its response to the report the Gillard Labor Government responded by noting (after a number of qualifications regarding the operations of MIVILUDES and issues of constitutional law):

Australia is home to a diversity of faiths, united by tolerance, mutual respect and a commitment to democratic traditions. All Australians are free to choose their religion and are able to express and practise their religion and their beliefs, without intimidation and without interference. The Government considers that it is not the Government's role to interfere with the religious beliefs or practices of individuals, unless they are in breach of Australian laws.

A number of very interesting documents, including Dr. Stephen Mutch's 2005 University of New South Wales PhD thesis dealing with government responses to the Church of Scientology in Australia and the United Kingdom, submissions from Australian cult-watch groups, and other documents relating to the 2010 Senate Economics Legislation Committee hearings can be downloaded [here](#).

Taking what one witness before the Senate Economic Legislation Committee labeled the "Al Capone Approach," Senator Xenophon and his supporters are pushing for the tax exempt status of a number of religious groups including the Church of Scientology, the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (who are currently before the UK Charity Commission) and the Jehovah's Witnesses to be stripped by the ACNC for either not providing a public benefit or for harm caused to current and former members.

Such charity commissions, of course, have long existed in other Commonwealth countries like the United Kingdom and New Zealand and calls for an Australia equivalent have long been recommended on entirely unrelated grounds (e.g. by the Rudd Labor Government's "Henry Tax Review").

However, despite the government's rejection of even investigating a cult-watch body on both pragmatic and constitutional grounds, Senator Xenophon has once again raised this issue with Melbourne journalist Chris Johnston from *The Age* newspaper.

Senator Xenophon is up for reelection to the Australian Senate in September of this year.

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Chris Johnston, 'Slamming the door on Jehovah,' *The Age*, March 16, 2013 retrieved from: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/slamming-the-door-on-jehovah-20130315-2g6fo.html>

### **Scientology.**

While the late February controversy surrounding the alleged illegal imprisonment of Taiwanese national Tracey Wu has disappeared from the media radar, book reviews have flooded Australian papers of Jenna Miscavige Hill and Lawrence Wright's latest works. Perhaps predictably reviews have been overwhelmingly positive. This said Hill's book does have some local interest due to her short time as a fund-raiser in the Canberra Scientology mission.

Meanwhile, as the Federal government has offered an additional \$11 million over five years to a Medicare funded program entitled Healthy Kids Check which has been running since July 2008. In response the Scientology linked Citizen's Commission for Human Rights (CCHR) have been writing to various kindergartens warning about the potential dangers of the program which they claimed may result in the prescription of psychotropic drugs, noting:

"There is no question that children can have problems and need help. However, the wholesale screening of children, the labelling of their behaviour as a mental disorder requiring the prescription of a mind-altering drug is placing Australia's children at risk."

A spokesperson for Federal Minister for Mental Health Mark Butler, however, has said that the material sent is incorrect. The [Healthy Kids Check](#) may follow the same schedule as any general check-up procedures, though with the stipulation that it must check height, weight, eyesight, hearing, oral health (teeth and gums), toileting and allergies. The check is undertaken on an entirely voluntary basis and is not a mental health check. Such claims come amid sporadic public concerns in Australia about the over utilization of pharmacological treatment of mental illness and the growing popularity of the anti-Vaccination lobby in Australia.

The CCHR has been a vocal critic of psychiatric and psychological establishment since its establishment in the late 1960s. In Australia it was instrumental in the closing of the Chelmsford Hospital in Sydney. In recent years Psychiatrist and 2010 Australian of the Year Patrick McGorry, a strong advocate of early intervention in the treatment of mental illness, publicly supported Senator Nick Xenophon's calls for an inquiry into the Church of Scientology.

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'Scientology putting lives at risk, says Australian of the Year Pat McGorry,' *News.com.au*, March 10, 2010 retrieved from:

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### **The Jehovah's Witnesses.**

The Jehovah's Witnesses, while generally seen as a benign group by most Australians, came in for criticism by journalist Chris Johnston in the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* over their practice of "disfellowshipping," in a human interest story on ex-Witness Bec Taylor. Calling the group a 'cruel cult,' Johnston gives an overview of key Witness beliefs before discussing a series of serious accusations.

In the wake of the recent Victorian inquiry into how churches have handled the issue of child sexual abuse, the Jehovah's Witnesses have also come under scrutiny for allegations of covering up allegations and are currently under investigation by Victorian Police taskforce Sano.

In a lead-up to this article Johnston published a piece drawing on the claims of long-time Australian "cult-buster" and erstwhile spokesman for the Chavad-Lubavitch Hassidic Community in Melbourne, Raphael Aron (sometimes referred to as Rabbi Raphael Aron, though I've been unable to confirm this).

As a bit of background, in 1978 Raphael Aron began an exit-counseling ministry aimed predominately, though not exclusively, toward Melbourne's Jewish youths who had joined 'cults.' While Aron has operated under a variety of different names since that time around 1991 (some sources say 1997) he founded *Cult Counseling Australia* (CCA) which has since become a major source for media interviews on minority religious groups and continues to offer exit-counseling. Aron has penned two books on 'cults.'

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#### **Plymouth Brethren Christian Church.**

Long touted by the Australian media as "Australia's biggest cult," the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (i.e. the Exclusive Brethren, the Raven-Taylor-Symington-Hales Brethren) have been a constant feature of the Australian media landscape since a series of revelations in 2006 regarding their involvement in third-party advertising against the Australian Greens Party and on behalf of the then governing Liberal Party of Australia (despite their religiously based refusal to vote in elections). Subsequent journalistic investigations demonstrated a worldwide pattern of political funding by Brethren groups directed toward conservative political parties.

While the Brethren have long lived largely peaceably with neighbors in rural and semi-rural communities across Australia and are generally viewed as a private but hard-working and scrupulously honest group of small business owners, since the series of media reports beginning in 2006 they have been involved in a series of planning controversies with local communities over the building of their meeting halls.

While the opposition of locals has ostensibly been on environmental grounds, media reports have played up what they are calling the “Brethren invasion” and this theme has become another staple story for tabloid current affairs television programs.

This month Wollondilly Council (near Camden Park south of Sydney) approved a new meeting hall with a maximum capacity of 110 people and a proviso that no services would be held before 8am (Brethren are known for their 6am Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Supper). A record number of local residents (300) showed up at the council meeting and expressed their disapproval in what Wollondilly Mayor Col Mitchell noting “I have never come across such a rude crowd. Never have I seen anything like this.”

Incidentally, in recent years the neighboring area of Camden was involved in an extremely bitter dispute over a proposal (eventually rejected) to build an Islamic school in the area.

Meanwhile, north of Sydney in Lisarow (near the city of Gosford) residents have continued to express their dismay as clearing began on the 800 seat meeting hall which was given approval last year after four years of council debates.

Brethren have been criticized for their private nature and their lack of involvement with the community, though somewhat ironically the group were recently singled out (not for the first time) by the rural *Goulburn Post* newspaper for their community spirit in preparing and serving food and beverages to Rural Fire Service volunteers during recent fires near the New South Wales city of Goulburn and the country towns of Tarlo and Yass.

Other controversies over planning developments have also occurred across Australia in locations including New South Wales in Lisarow on the Central Coast, Llandilo near Penrith in the western outskirts of Sydney, Heathcote in the south of Sydney, West Pennant Hills in Sydney’s Hill’s District; and Queensland in Gympie, Manly West outside Brisbane, and Bundaberg.

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