



Freedom of Thought Report – Australia

Presentation to Atheist Society by Leslie Allan

9 May 2024

Presentation summary



Each year, Humanists International compiles its *Freedom of Thought Report* examining systemic and legal discrimination across the globe against humanists, atheists and the non-religious. After presenting a brief overview of the recently released 2023 report, Leslie Allan will explore the key findings for Australia. Although Australia has a proud history of separation of church and state, the report highlights some continuing areas of concern with government, education and freedom of expression. Participants are encouraged to ask questions and share their views on the report findings.

Please note: The views expressed by the speaker are their own and may not necessarily reflect the official position of Humanists Australia.

Humanists Australia and Freedom of Thought

Humanists Australia is a member organisation of Humanists International. Together, we advocate for a more tolerant and benevolent society in which all, regardless of their religious belief (or non-belief), can reach their full potential. Rewarding and satisfying lives are only achievable when each of us can follow our conscience and our passions, free from bigotry, persecution and discrimination on the basis of belief. For every *Freedom of Thought Report*, Humanists International invites Humanists Australia to assist with providing information about the current situation in Australia.

Freedom of Thought Report – Australia

- What Is Humanists International?
- What is the *Freedom of Thought Report*?
- What are the key findings of the report?
- What does the report say about Australia?
- So what?

Followed by questions and discussion

What Is Humanists International?

- founded in Amsterdam in 1952 as International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)
- changed name to Humanists International in 2019
- umbrella organisation for >160 organisations in > 80 countries
- maintains delegations to United Nations Human Rights Council, United Nations and Council of Europe

“Humanists International is the global representative democratic body of the humanist movement, which unites a diversity of humanist (and other non-religious) organizations and individuals. We want everyone to live a life of dignity in a world where universal human rights are respected and protected, including adherence to political secularism by all states. We work to build, support and represent the global humanist movement by defending human rights, particularly those pertaining to non-religious people, and promoting humanist values world-wide as exemplified in the Amsterdam Declaration (2002).”

[The Freedom of Thought Report 2023, Key Countries Edition]

Freedom of Thought Report: Purpose & Objectives

- researched and published by Humanists International annually
- reports on systemic/legal discrimination against non-religious
- focuses on restrictions to:
 - freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief
 - freedom of expression
 - freedom of assembly and association
- Key Countries Edition updates 10 countries in 2023

Freedom of Thought: Human Rights Context

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

[Article 18, Universal Declaration of Human Rights]

Freedom of Thought: Human Rights Context

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

[Article 19, Universal Declaration of Human Rights]

Freedom of Thought: Human Rights Context

- “1. Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
2. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.”

[Article 20, Universal Declaration of Human Rights]

Freedom of Thought Report: Findings

- overwhelming majority of countries fail to respect rights of humanists, atheists and the non-religious [p. 11]
- >10 countries, 'apostasy' is punishable with death [p. 13]
- many countries' 'blasphemy' laws outlaw criticism of protected religions, religious beliefs, figures and institutions [p. 13]
- some countries bar atheists marrying, remove parental rights [p. 13]
- some countries ban non-religious, bar from public office, privilege state religion [p. 13]
- Watch List: Afghanistan, Greece, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Uganda [pp. 21-5]

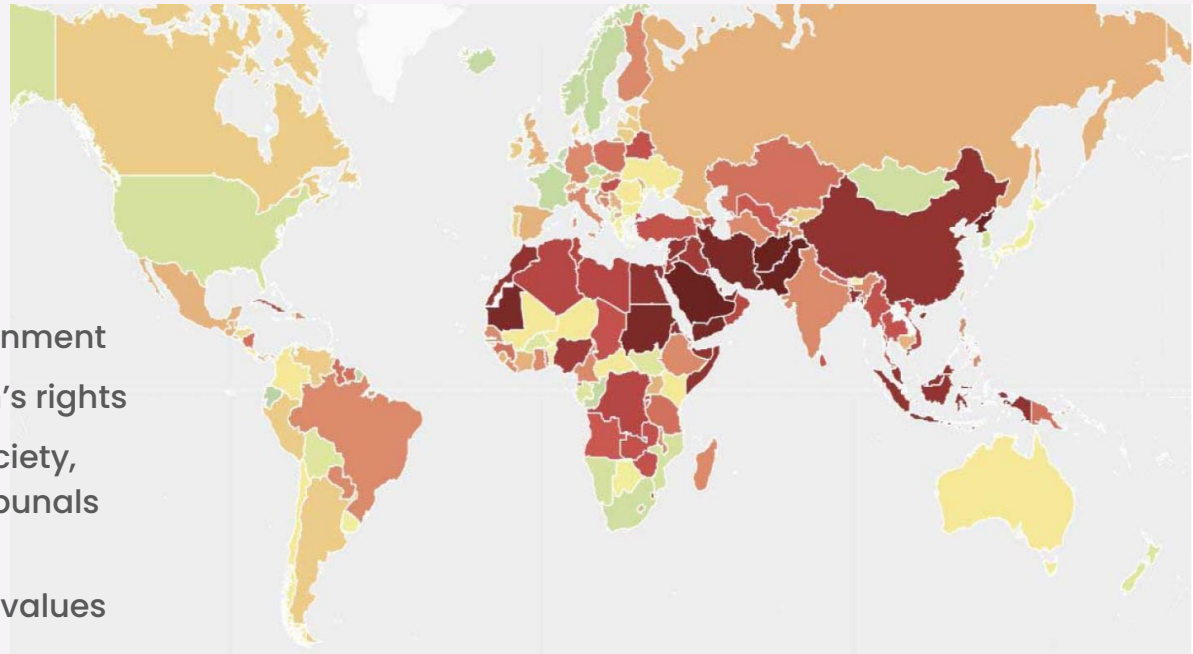
All references to Key Countries Edition

Freedom of Thought Report: Findings

Summary Score



- Constitution and government
- Education and children's rights
- Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals
- Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values



Australia: What's Working Well

- constitutional protection of religion/non-religion (sec. 116) [p. 27]
- federal laws protect freedom of religion/belief [pp. 27-8]
- most states decriminalised abortion [p. 28]
- all states legalised voluntary assisted dying [p. 28]
- protections for freedom of expression and association/free press [pp. 28-9]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Australia: Primary Concerns

- no federal human rights charter [p. 27]
- some public ceremonies are Christian [p. 27]
- religious institutions exempt from tax and compliance [p. 27]
- religious instruction in public schools by unqualified volunteers [p. 28]
- National School Chaplaincy Program is discriminatory [p. 28]
- private religious schools receive most public funding [p. 28]
- three states target climate and non-violent protesters [p. 29]
- some states still outlaw 'blasphemy' [p. 29]
- state 'religious vilification' laws may restrict criticism of religion [p. 29]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Australia: Constitution and Government

“Although the government is officially secular, it continues to favor Christianity for many public ceremonies. For example, each session of parliament begins with a joint recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. Various groups campaign against that practice, and have had successes at a local government level, giving some cause for optimism in the State of Victoria.

Religious institutions in general also enjoy longstanding privileges in being exempt from paying tax and from complying with laws, such as the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act against discrimination and Australian Charities & Not-for-profits Commission Act for transparent governance.” [p. 27]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Secularism Australia Conference 2023 – Prayers

Victor Franco
Councillor at
City of Boroondara

How many councils pray?

Table 1: Local government prayer practices—count by state

State	LGAs with a prayer practice	
New South Wales	72 out of 129	55.8%
Victoria	42 out of 79	53.2%
Queensland	35 out of 78	44.9%
Western Australia	11 out of 137	8.0%
South Australia	23 out of 70	32.9%
Tasmania	8 out of 29	27.6%
Total	191 out of 522	36.6%

Australia: Constitution and Government

“In 2019, a ‘religious discrimination’ bill was proposed that would prohibit “discrimination in certain areas of public life on the ground of religious belief or activity”. Many groups, including anti-discrimination commissions throughout the country, opposed it. While the coalition government set out to develop a second version, that too was strongly opposed and despite passing with amendments in the lower house, it was never brought to the Senate for debate before the 2022 election changed the government. The new Australian Labor Party (ALP) government has said it will prepare a revised bill that removes some of the contentious areas where state-based anti-discrimination laws were overridden.” [p. 28]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Australia: Education and Children's Rights

“The state governments permit religious education in public schools, generally taught by volunteers using approved curricula, to varying degrees. Public schools in New South Wales provide secular ethics classes as an alternative for students who do not attend religious instruction classes. In other states, there is no secular alternative to religious education, but non-religious students may opt out of the class.” [p. 28]

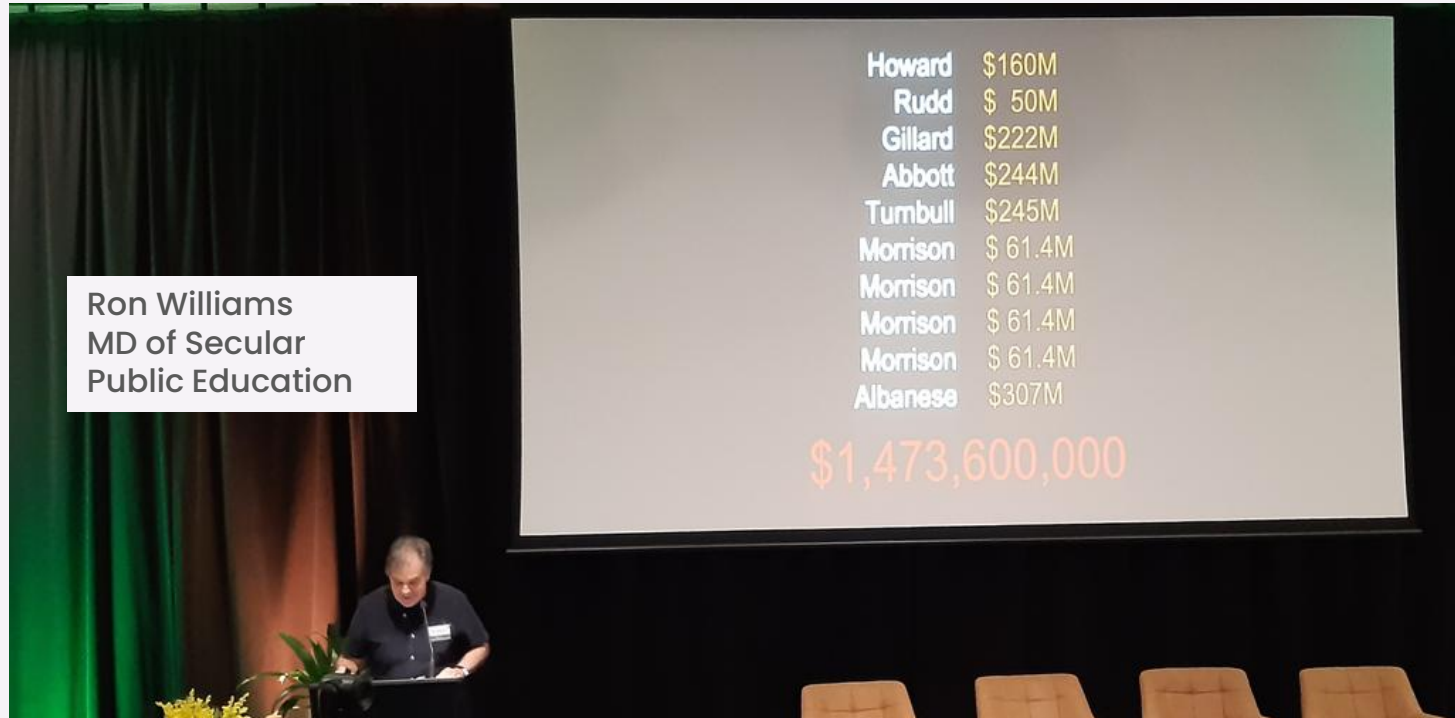
“Both the Australian federal government and state and territory governments provide funding for private schools, the great majority of which are faith-based. Catholic schools are reported to receive up to 75% of their funding from government funds.” [p. 28]

Australia: Education and Children's Rights

“In 2023, the Federal government expanded its former National School Chaplaincy Program, which provided financial support for government and non-government school communities to conduct chaplaincy services. The current incarnation of the program, renamed the National Student Wellbeing Program, no longer requires chaplains to be religious. The program emphasizes that wellbeing officers and chaplains must not proselytize and must “respect, accept and be sensitive to other views, values and beliefs.” Nevertheless, provision of chaplains is mostly managed through contracts with religiously-dominated organizations who appear to prefer religious candidates.”
[p. 28]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Secularism Australia Conference 2023 – Chaplains



Australia: Family, Community and Society

“An analysis of 2016 census data and other academic surveys suggests that religious belief is on the decline in Australia with 62% of the population reporting that they did not belong to a religious organization. 71% of Australians indicated that religion was not personally important. Further, 80% of marriages are now conducted in civil ceremonies.” [p. 28]

Australian Census 2021 results:

43.9% Christian

10.0% Other religions

38.7% No religion, Secular beliefs

Australia: Freedom of Expression, Humanist Values

“As in many parts of the world, the polarization and claims of discrimination or being silenced have increased on both sides of several topics. For instance, there was strong debate about the right of a high profile sports person to publicly declare that “homosexuals (among others) are bound for hell”. The person’s contract was canceled and a court case ensued where they claimed religious discrimination as the statement was part of their religious belief. The case was settled before trial, avoiding the setting of a legal precedent.” [p. 29]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Religious Discrimination – Israel Folau

The former Wallabies star had been suing RA for A\$14m (£7.4m; \$9.5m) after having his contract terminated in May.

Folau, a Christian, argued that the termination of his contract was a case of religious discrimination.

The parties had settled for a confidential amount, according to a joint statement on Wednesday.

Folau was sacked for saying “hell awaits” gay people, after previously being warned over his social media posts.

BBC 2019. 'Israel Folau reaches settlement with Rugby Australia', Published 4 December 2019
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-50653762>



The image is a screenshot of a BBC news article. At the top, the headline reads "Israel Folau reaches settlement with Rugby Australia". Below the headline is the BBC logo. A navigation bar contains links for Home, News, Sport, Business, Innovation, Culture, Travel, Earth, Video, and Live. The main content area features a photograph of Israel Folau, a rugby player, wearing a yellow and green Australian Wallabies jersey. Below the photo is a caption: "Rugby Australia sacked Folau for making anti-gay comments". At the bottom of the article, a sub-headline states: "Rugby player Israel Folau has reached a settlement with Rugby Australia (RA) over his controversial sacking for writing anti-gay posts on social media."

Australia: Freedom of Expression, Humanist Values

“Consequently, the common law offenses of ‘blasphemy’ and blasphemous libel may yet exist in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and the Northern Territory, and the common law offense of ‘blasphemy’ in the Capital Territory. Code offenses of ‘blasphemy’ and blasphemous libel exist in Tasmania.” [p. 29]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Australia: Freedom of Expression, Humanist Values

“The federal government and several states have passed laws outlawing “racial vilification” and the states of Tasmania, Queensland and Victoria have extended those laws to also outlaw “religious vilification”. There is debate about the extent to which these laws only proscribe incitement to hatred, or whether they may be used to suppress non-inciting speech about religious beliefs and practices.”
[p. 29]

All references to Key Countries Edition

Concluding remarks

- Which of the report findings on Australia concern you the most?
- How did we get here?
- Is Australia getting better or worse?
- What can we (including you) do about the situation?

Further reading

ABS, **Cultural Diversity: Census**,

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-diversity-census/2021>

Humanists International, **The Freedom of Thought Report**, online edition, <https://fot.humanists.international/>

Humanists International, **The Freedom of Thought Report 2023: Key Countries Edition**,

<https://fot.humanists.international/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/FOTR-2023-FINAL.pdf>

Secularism Australia, **Secularism Australia Conference 2023**, <https://secularism.au/>

Speaker: Leslie Allan



Leslie Allan academically trained in philosophy and history of religions at La Trobe University. In his working life, Leslie's career spanned electronics, information technology, training and development and business improvement. Over the years, he has authored many articles and given various talks on humanism, ethics, religion and philosophy.

In 2018, Leslie started up Australia's first Ex-Religious Support Network, now a Humanists Australia Community. He sits on the Board of Humanists Australia and runs the Philosophy Matters Meetup. In 2014, he created RationalRealm.com, a web site dedicated to exploring the boundaries between science and philosophy.

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Humanists Australia is a national organisation which launched in December 2020 in response to the growing number of Australians who don't identify as religious, and the emerging need to represent this group's interests and priorities on a broader scale.

We are dedicated to helping people live ethical and meaningful lives through humanism. Through our ceremonies, educational resources and awareness-raising, we help non-religious people discover humanism and humanist values, so that they can live an ethical life full of meaning and fulfilment.

Through our campaigns work, we advocate for positive social change. We advocate for rational, evidence-based policies that reduce societal inequalities, advance secularism, advance human rights and improve quality of life.



- Website:** humanistsaustralia.org
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