

## **From Raimond Gaita**

A response to some of the comments on my article. In it I said, " Nothing in what follows requires you to know anything about Steiner education. My little story doesn't advocate Steiner education or defend its place at Footscray City Primary. It is about breach of trust and authoritarianism mistaking itself for an exercise of responsible, benevolent authority'. If I had space I would have elaborated. As it is, some people were misled, taking me to be deliberately evasive.

On October 27, the Age reported John Allman, Deputy Secretary, Office for Government School Education, as denying that "the decision was about Steiner education", and as acknowledging that "programs were successfully run at schools including Collingwood College, Bentleigh East Primary and Briar Hill Primary". I have no reason to think he was lying. Some people obviously wish that concern about Steiner education generally and its place in state funded schools had informed the Department's decision to close the Steiner Stream at Footscray City Primary School. Apparently it didn't. The concern, as it was expressed, was only about the affects of the Steiner stream at Footscray on children and the school.

In the same report in the Age, Mr Allman was also reported as saying, 'I don't want to over dramatise it, but it's an intervention that's out of the ordinary . . . The reality is we believe students at the school can get a much better deal than what they are getting.' That suggests that things were pretty desperate at Footscray City Primary and that therefore drastic action was needed. (And

announcing the closure of a stream that has in it almost half of the children of a school, without consultation or even warning, three months before the beginning of the next school year, is drastic action indeed.) But an impressive number of parents from both streams say that they do not understand what Allson had in mind. Though they readily acknowledge difficulties in the past, going back as far as ten years, their impression over last two years is of harmony and cooperation between the two streams. Parents from the mainstream praise the benefits to the school of the Steiner stream.

A few months ago a principal in an inner city private school was sacked summarily. The school called a meeting with all concerned parents to explain why such drastic action was needed. At the very least, the regional authority of the Department of Education should have done something similar. As things stand, parents are entirely in the dark about why the Department acted as it did, and, as I said in my article, when a parent from the council asked for evidence to support the claim that the closure of the Steiner stream is in the best interests of the school, including (one assumes) the children in the stream, his request was declined.

Some of the people who wrote comments seems to believe that Steiner education is irrationalist mumbo jumbo and infected through and through by racism. I can assure them that if my grandson's education in the Steiner stream at Footscray had been *even remotely* like that, his parents would not have kept him there and I would not have written my article. And the implication that though not necessarily racists themselves, Steiner teachers

and parents are tone deaf to the racism that infects Steiner education is gratuitously insulting.

The only evidence produced in the comments on my article that the Steiner stream has, over the last couple of years, caused such tension at the school as to justify its closure, is the fact that this year the principal took stress leave. Parents from both streams acknowledge, however, that the reasons she took leave are controversial. I have no opinion on the controversy, except to say that where there is controversy that seriously affects school policy, there should be discussion of it. And that, generalised, was the burden of my argument and was why I said that my article was not about Steiner education, or about Steiner at Footscray, but about breach of trust and authoritarianism masquerading as responsible and benevolent authority.

If the Department is to rescue its authority from the authoritarian way it has behaved (and, indeed, if given the circumstances of his appointment and the insensitivity of what he has written on the school website, the new principal is to have authority) then it seems to me obvious what needs to be done. The situation in Footscray should be restored to what it was before the announcement of the closure of the Steiner stream. Such evidence as exists for the claim that the interests of the children and the school would be better served by the closure of the Steiner stream should be made publically available, assessed by an independent and fully representative committee and discussed, in one form or another, and by all who are directly affected by it.

A final point. I was accused of misusing my “scholarly authority” in writing as I did. Readers may have noted that I described myself only as a writer and a philosopher. In order not to abuse my academic titles I did not appeal them.

**Raimond Gaita**

In response to comments on The Age website 3 November 2011