Culture wars in South Australia: the sex education debates

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Abstract
School sexuality education has been a component of Australia's successful and internationally recognized HIV/AIDS strategy since the 1980s and has been well accepted in the community. However South Australia is experiencing a re-emergence of opposition to school sexuality education orchestrated by groups associated with the United States-based Christian Right. In this paper I will outline sex education policy developments in Australia and the United States as a framework for discussing the controversy generated around the Sexual Health and Relationships Education (SHARE) program in South Australia in 2003. In doing so I give attention to the similarities between the strategies deployed by the opponents of SHARE and those used to install abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education as national policy in the United States. I will argue that, rather than a phenomenon indigenous to South Australia, these debates are part of an international movement to progress the political goals of the Christian Right.

Keywords: Christian Right, sex education
Introduction

Much has been written about the rise of the Christian Right in the United States and its influence on domestic and international policies over the past two decades (Baltimore, 2004; Blackburn, 2004; Delameter 2004; Chavkin, 2004; Irvine, 2004; Buss and Herman, 2003; Committee on Government Reform, 2003; McGee and Novotny, 2003; Berlet and Lyons, 2000; Moen, 1994; Diamond, S, 1992). More recently social commentators in Australia have drawn attention to a similar phenomenon in this country, pointing to an increase in political activism by Christian Right groups and the alliances they are forming with state and federal politicians from mainstream political parties (Lohrey, 2006; Maddox, 2005). Opposition to the piloting of a new sex education program in South Australia in 2003 is a case in point. In form and content it had all the hallmarks of the Christian Right grass roots activism that has typified the opposition to comprehensive sex education in the United States since the 1960s. In this paper I am using the term ‘Christian Right’ as defined by Berlet: a United States-based social movement that ‘uses a pious and traditionalist constituency as its mass base to pursue the political goal of imposing a narrow theological agenda on secular society’ (Berlet, 1994:22).

The battles between Christian Right and affiliated groups and those with a more secular humanist vision for society have been described as ‘culture wars’ (Collins, 2006; Maddox, 2005; McKnight 2003; Zimmerman, 2002; Shor, 1986). First coined in Germany in 1879 to describe conflicts between Protestants and Catholics over religion in schools, the term is now used more broadly to designate a clash of values between progressive and orthodox stakeholders on a range of social issues, from gay rights to ‘radical feminism’, abortion, prayer in public schools and sex education (Collins, 2006: 342; Zimmerman, 2002; Shor, 1986). Ultimately culture wars are battles to determine who defines cultural and political values from their ideological position, whether their position is supported by evidence or not. Schools continue to be an arena for the culture wars, spaces where an agenda that is ‘national in its origins and goals... privileges the local as a scale of action and authority.’ (Mattingly, 1998: 65).

Sex education in Australia

Australia is a more secular society than the United States (Maddox, 2005; Black, 1983; Bouma, 1983) and, as Maddox points out, ‘raised on larrkin anticlericalism’, the Australian electorate does not like its leaders ‘to look religiously fanatical or excessive’ (Maddox, 2005:4). In the past a person seeking political office has not been disadvantaged if they are known to be agnostic or atheist and, although groups affiliated with the Christian Right have been active in Australia and mounted opposition to school sex education in the 1970s and early 1980s (Preston, 2007; Mendelsohn, 1983), their political clout on this issue has been limited since the advent of HIV/AIDS (Jose, 1995). The diagnosis of AIDS in Australia in 1983 provided an impetus for a national approach to sex education. From the outset young people were identified as a priority and school sexuality education was seen as a way of reaching them (Commonwealth
of Australia, 1988). In 1988 the federal government called for education that was ‘honest, explicit and comprehensive’ and ‘realistic in its assumptions about the attitudes, skills and behaviour of young people’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1988: 143). School sex education became a component of the first and subsequent HIV/AIDS Strategies (Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, c2000; National HIV/AIDS Strategy, 1993-94 to 1995-96, 1995) and, as education is a state responsibility in Australia, the implementation of HIV/AIDS education in schools was facilitated by federal-state funding agreements.

The Australian federal government renewed its commitment to sex education in 1999, publishing a national framework to consolidate and progress earlier efforts. That framework, entitled Talking Sexual Health, adopted a health promoting school model (Mitchell and Ollis, 2000), emphasised the social constructions of gender and power which affect young people’s ability to negotiate sexual encounters, and highlighted the need to address diversity, including sexual diversity. With regard to the latter, the document states that ‘Australian schools are clearly not achieving their goal of providing a safe and supportive learning environment for all students...For gay and lesbian students it is not only the overt harassment and violence they experience but also their invisibility in mainstream programs’ (Talking Sexual Health, 1999: 44–45). This statement was supported by Australian research which showed that gay and lesbian young people experience high levels of harassment in schools from other students and, at times, from teachers (Hillier et al, 1998).

Talking Sexual Health was endorsed by all states and territories (Mitchell and Ollis, 2000) and the accompanying resource for parents received the official imprimatur of the two major national school-parent associations (Mitchell and Ollis, 2000). This suggests that there was support among key stakeholders for the strategies it contained, including those aspects that addressed sexual preference and sought to counter discrimination against gay, lesbian and bisexual people. Talking Sexual Health provided a reference point for the development of the SHARE program in South Australia.

Although South Australia is one of the smaller states in Australia, at times in its history it has been known for its public policy reform. It recognised Aboriginal land rights in the 1970s, was one of the first states (with Victoria) to liberalise abortion laws in 1969 and, in 1975, became the first state to decriminalise sex between men (Tiddy, 1996). Sex education programs were introduced in public schools in the 1960s and 70s (Jose, 1995; Banfield 1973), however discussion of homosexuality was actively discouraged by the Department of Education (Jose, 1999: 200). In 1985 a ‘brief but vociferous questioning of control over content of sex education’ instigated by the Festival of Light reinforced this position (Jose, 1999: 198) but by the 1990s the political climate had changed. The guide to effective teaching practice in sexuality and HIV/AIDS education published by the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) in 1997, advised teachers to affirm diversity and gender equity and be inclusive of gay, lesbian and bisexual students (DECS, 1997: 19).
South Australia was an active participant in HIV/AIDS prevention, publishing its own strategy in 1987 and appointing HIV/AIDS consultants for State, Catholic and Independent school systems (South Australian Health Commission 1987; Beckinsale et al. 1997). SHine SA, formerly the Family Planning Association of South Australia, played a major role in school-based sex education and HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives (Beckinsale et al. 1997) and has provided sexuality education for teachers, health workers and youth workers since its inception in the 1970s (Jose, 1995). For SHine SA, the development and piloting of the SHARE program represented a continuation of earlier collaborative relationships with the South Australia Departments of Human Services and Education.

Funded by the Department of Human Services, the pilot SHARE program fits within the national Talking Sexual Health framework and the South Australia curriculum frameworks (SHine SA, 2003c). The program was based on research about effective practice in sex education (Dyson et al, 2003) and, in order to guide the implementation of the program in participating schools, health and wellbeing committees were established made up of parents, teachers, students and health workers (SHine SA 2003a, b). Given the SHARE program’s evidence base, alignment with national and state curriculum frameworks, parental involvement in participating schools and its evaluation by the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, one of the foremost sexuality research institutions in the country, SHine SA had reason to be confident, as did its government partners. However the launch of the SHARE program attracted the attention of groups associated with the Christian Right and the program’s recognition of minority sexualities generated the kind of opposition that has dominated the political landscape in United States since the 1960s.

Sex education policy in the United States

In contrast with Australia, the United States has had a sustained abstinence-only-until-marriage or ‘abstinence-only’ sexuality education movement since 1981 and a national policy of abstinence-only sex education since 1996 (Perrin and Bernecki Dejoy, 2004; Young M. and Bailey W. 1998). The notion of abstinence-only sex education is an ideological construct of the Christian Right. There is little evidence of the efficacy of this approach, yet the term has entered the sex education lexicon in the United States, resulting in the division of programs into two competing categories—‘comprehensive’ and ‘abstinence-only’. Sex education programs designated as ‘comprehensive’ encourage young people to exercise responsibility in sexual relationships and, while they include abstinence, they also provide information about contraception, disease prevention and other sexual health measures (National Guidelines Task Force, 1996: 3–5). In contrast, abstinence-only sex education programs, as outlined in the United States government policy, have as their exclusive purpose the teaching of ‘the social, psychological, and health gains to be realised by abstaining from sexual activity’. They teach that abstinence is the expected standard for all school-aged children, the only certain way to avoid
out-of-wedlock pregnancy and STIs, and that sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects (Young and Bailey, 1998: 208).

Since the first abstinence-only sex education programs were funded under the Family Life Education Act (AFLA) in 1981, concerns have been raised about their legality under the Establishment Clause (separation of church and state) of the United States Constitution, their lack of support from the majority of the electorate (Perrin and Bernecki-Dejoy, 2004); their exclusion of the needs of sexually active heterosexual students and sexual minority students (Irving, 2004; Mayo, 2004) and their lack of efficacy (Trenholm et al, 2007; Brückner and Bearman, 2005; Hauser, 2003; Kirby, 2001; 2002). As Mayo (2004: 124) argues ‘An education predicated on the absence of information does not generate confidence in students or teachers’.

There is still much to be learned about what works in school sexuality education. Evaluations of programs conducted in the United States have found that, while there are ‘no easy answers’ (Kirby, 1997) and ‘emerging answers’ (Kirby, 2001; Satcher, 2001), some comprehensive programs have been able to delay the initiation of sex and, when program participants do become sexually active, they are more likely to use condoms and contraception to protect themselves from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. The programs demonstrating the greatest success have well-trained teachers, are sustained over time, address the social context of participants, provide access to reproductive health services and offer a range of social programs (Advocates for Youth 2008; Santelli et al, 2007; Vincent et al, 2004; Kantor and Bacon, 2003; Kirby, 2001; Satcher, 2001). Similarly, OECD countries with low rates of teen pregnancy and abortion—for example The Netherlands, Germany and France—have achieved these statistics through a combination of programs, including comprehensive school sex education, media strategies promoting condom use and accessible sexual health services for young people (Ferguson et al, 2008; Moore, 2000; Berne and Huberman, 1999; Ketting and Visser, 1994).

It seems logical that an administration seeking to reduce teenage pregnancy would take account of the available evidence on effective sex education and the strategies of European countries with low teenage pregnancy and abortion rates. This is not the case in the United States. Federal funding for abstinence-only programs was increased in 2004 and, when a journalist asked why, given the lack of evidence to support their efficacy, the response was, ‘Values trump data!’ (DeLameter, 2004). Rather than a singular incident, this appears to be part of a broader phenomenon that has raised concerns in the scientific community internationally (Blackburn, 2004; Clark, 2003; McKee and Novotny, 2003) and in the United States (Baltimore, 2004; Chavkin, 2004; Markowitz and Rosner, 2003). There have been reports of government interference in the peer review process (Steinbrook, 2004), reluctance to fund research, including sexuality research, that does not fit with its own ideological agenda, and censorship of government websites making access to accurate sexuality information more difficult (DeLameter, 2004; Committee on Government Reform, 2003; Bailey et
al, 2002). The abstinence-only policy has been described by some commentators as 'a boon-doggle for the far-right' (Bailey and Young, 1998: 207), but Janice Irvine, a social historian who has studied the matter, suggests that it is much more than this. It is an indication of 'the power of the Christian Right at the end of the century to legislate its own particular value system' (Irvine, 2004: 102).

The rise of the Christian Right and its opposition to 'radical' feminism, abortion and gay rights in the United States and internationally have been well documented (Irving, 2004; Buss and Herrman, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002; Berlet and Lyons, 2000). Moen (1994: 351) describes how, in the late 1980s, the Christian Right entered an 'institutionalization period' during which it consolidated its financial situation by establishing genuine membership in organizations such as Concerned Women for America and Focus on the Family. It expanded its base, using traditional values and pro-family rhetoric to establish common ground among groups that were theologically diverse (Irvine, 2004). The idea of a 'culture war' provided the strategy for 'a calculated campaign to infiltrate and influence carefully selected repositories of political power' (Moen, 1994: 345; Berlet, 1994). The results are noted by Kohn (1995: 7), who observed following the 1994 federal election that, 'In exchange for helping those Republicans (to gain seats in Congress), conservative organizations such as Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family are now calling on members of Congress to advance their agenda against family planning, contraception, sex education and abortion'.

The use of a culture war as a strategy for advancing conservative values in the United States has much in common with a European phenomenon Nederveen Pieterse describes as 'Gramscism of the right'; that is, 'the pursuit of cultural influence as a right-wing political strategy'; the idea that 'the cultural sphere had to be won before political power could be gained' (Nederveen Pieterse, 1992, p.22-25). In taking up the ideas of Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, in particular the use of grass roots activism to change cultural institutions, Christian Right strategists adopted 'the successful organising, research, and training methods...pioneered by the labor and civil rights movements' in the United States (Berlet 1994: 16).

Moen (1994: 353) predicted in 1994 that the spread and intensification of grass roots activism by the Christian Right would see public education become a target 'because of the school's key role in socialising citizens'. Irvine (2004) shows that this has been the case; that local debates about sex education provided a platform for Christian Right community activism, fund-raising and membership recruitment. Irvine has documented the strategies used by the Christian Right to generate opposition to comprehensive sex education and promote abstinence-only programs. The strategies she describes have much in common with those deployed by the opponents of the SHARE Program in South Australia.
'Someone's giving him words'
In her analysis Irving distinguishes two rhetorical modes through which the Christian Right sought to undermine community support for comprehensive sex education in the United States: oppositional and participatory. The former refers to 'efforts to eliminate a sex education program or a specific curriculum by associating it with a specific set of negative and frightening meanings'. This discourse, she argues, 'frames sex education and sex educators themselves as dangerous and depraved and plays into historical anxieties about sex.' (Irvine, 2004: 11). The participatory mode refers to the Christian Right's own sexuality industry, a well-funded 'infrastructure of organizations, media outlets and sexual commodities such as books, videos, sex education curricula and workshops', including abstinence-only curricula, which 'shifted the terms of conflict from whether sex education should be taught in schools to which curricula should be taught.' (Irvine 2004: 12, italics in the original). While both rhetorical modes were evident, the oppositional mode has the best fit with the strategies used against the SHARE program in South Australia.

The opposition was led by religious and conservative organisations such as the Festival of Light, the Australian Family Association and the Family First Party. The Festival of Light's opposition marked a revival of its 1970s and 1980s campaigns against school sex education and the inclusion of homosexuality in state curricula (Preston, 2007; Jose 1999; Mendelsohn, 1983). The Australian Family Association's participation was probably prompted by a compatible agenda, in particular opposition to gay rights (Buss and Herman, 2003: 85).

The Family First Party's involvement signalled its alignment with the United States Christian Right, both ideologically and strategically. Constituted as a political party in South Australia in 2001, Family First was a newcomer to Australian politics and had much to gain from the media exposure stories about young people and sexuality were bound to generate. Its leader in South Australia, Andrew Evans, was formerly the national head of the Assemblies of God Church. He was elected to the upper house of the South Australian Parliament in 2002 and was joined in his opposition to the SHARE program by some members of the state and federal Liberal Party, who may have supported his views or saw the political benefit of such an alliance (Chapman, 2003; Draper, 2003). While the campaign against SHARE might have been dismissed as coming from a relatively small conservative constituency, the participation of some members of the state and federal Liberal Party gave it visibility and status that it might not have otherwise achieved.

Opponents of SHARE made use of the print media to pursue their goal of eliminating the program by associating it with 'a specific set of negative and frightening meanings' (Irvine, 2004; Sunday Mail, March 23, 2003) and Parliament as a forum for debate. Adopting a strategy used by their United States counterparts, they claimed that the draft teacher training manual, Teach it like it is, was the curriculum, and took materials out of context.
The bulk of *Teach it like it is* deals with topics such as health and wellbeing, puberty, female and male reproductive systems, gender, power, harassment, stereotypes, safer sex and decision-making. Within this broad framework, the resource addresses diversity, including cultural, social, and sexual diversity and disability (*Teach it like it is: Draft*, n.d.). Despite the breadth of the content of the teacher training manual, opponents of SHARE chose to emphasise words from the glossary and segments of the resource related to sexual diversity, endeavouring to convey the impression that this was the focus of the program.

*Teach it like it is* introduced teachers to recent research on young people’s sexual health and wellbeing, including that of gay, lesbian and bisexual young people. While *Teach it like it is* was not the curriculum, it did contain activities that teachers could use with students. For example, there was a survey that teachers could conduct to find out what students would like to learn during the program. Students could choose from 23 possible topics, one of which was ‘gay, lesbian and bisexual issues’ (*Teach it like it is: Draft*, n.d.: 17). Sexuality scenarios applicable to young people generally, and gay, lesbian and bisexual young people specifically, were included in the resource. The section on harassment addressed issues for gay, lesbian and bisexual young people along with other groups who experience discrimination, and offered strategies for countering such behaviour.

Despite the need to address these issues in schools, opponents of SHARE were quoted in an article published in the *Sunday Mail*, South Australia’s Sunday newspaper, as describing the program as ‘vile’ and the role playing ‘dangerous’ (*Sunday Mail*, March 23, 2003). At times during the campaign it was suggested that ‘nowhere’ did the SHARE program address ‘ordinary heterosexual development’ (*The Advertiser*, May 1st, 2004: 127). Because it was still in draft form, the inside cover of *Teach it like it is* contained the words ‘Draft copy only. Not for distribution or citation’. This led opponents to suggest that the program had been developed in secrecy. Much of their language was derivative of United States Christian Right discourse on sex education. As one American school board member said of a sex education opponent, ‘Someone’s giving him words.’ (Irving, 2004: 3).

**Reinforcing sexual stigma**

The notion that *Teach it like it is* was the SHARE curriculum continued to be promulgated at public meetings organised by opponents, even after a Parliamentary briefing by SHine SA had clarified that *Teach it like it is* was not the curriculum, but a training program for teachers (Parliamentary Debates SA, Legislative Council, May 1st, 2003; Flyer ‘Sex Education in our Schools’ distributed at a public forum on May 7th). Six public meetings were organised by opponents of SHARE during 2003. Although promoted as community consultation, in reality they were not conducive to constructive dialogue (Gibson, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Parliamentary Debates SA, House of Assembly, December 4, 2003–04: 1116). There was no independent chair. Typically the chairperson opened the meeting with an attack on SHARE and was followed by a succession of speakers who did the same (Vaughn, 2004).
Most of the criticisms pertained to the draft teacher-training manual, *Teach it like it is*, particularly those segments that were inclusive of sexual minorities. The idea that the very mention of gay and lesbian sexualities equates with the ‘promotion’ of those sexualities was a theme of the meetings, an undercurrent of which was the ‘threat’ posed to ‘normal’ heterosexual children.

Views that diverged from those of the panellists did not receive a good hearing. For example one parliamentarian reported being subjected to verbal abuse from the audience when he attempted to defend the SHARE Program at a meeting held in his electorate, and later he received threats of physical violence. This he attributed to the ‘misinformation and dishonesty which a segment of the community have been promoting in relation to SHARE and SHine’ (Parliamentary Debates SA, House of Assembly, December 4, 2003–04: 1116).

An account of a public meeting, held on July 7th, 2003, gives an indication of the mood. ‘During question time...there were claims that SHine SA and the SHARE Project are using schools to ‘recruit’ for the gay and lesbian cause (and) the gay and lesbian rights lobby was likened to a dictatorship in Nazi Germany...’ (Vaughn, 2004). Similar practices have been documented in the United States, where sex educators ‘have been called everything from communists to dirty old women to paedophiles’ (Irving, 2004: 73).

The idea that the SHARE Program was teaching information that was misleading and medically incorrect was also promulgated. One flyer asserted that the program was misleading because it failed ‘to mention that the only safe sex is abstinence before marriage and fidelity within marriage’ (URGENT, c2003). As Mayo points out, such assertions assume incorrectly that abstinence has no failure rate, that husbands and wives will always remain faithful and that marriage is a place of safety, ignoring child sexual abuse and domestic violence (Mayo, 2004: 53). The suggestion that information provided by the SHARE Program was ‘medically incorrect’ pertained to two things: the safety of condoms (URGENT, c2003), a common theme in materials produced by the United States Christian Right (see for example DeLameter 2004; Committee on Government Reform, 2003); and the diagrams of the reproductive system in the teacher training manual. With regard to the latter, it was argued that the inclusion of the anus in the diagram of the reproductive system was medically incorrect because it suggested that the anus was part of the reproductive system. This led one parliamentarian to comment that ‘There is an element of obsession...a whole lot of distortion that accompanies that.’ (Parliamentary Debates SA, House of Assembly, December 4, 2003–04: 1116).

A flyer distributed at one of the public meetings urged concerned people to write to the Premier to ask that the SHARE program be withdrawn. The flyer listed as contacts people affiliated with the Festival of Light and the Family First Party and provided seven criticisms that writers could include in their letters. Those criticisms and the language used echoed that of United States activists. Those writing letters were advised ‘not to mention you are a Christian or that
you are from a church’ (URGENT, c2003), suggesting that the authors of the
flyer sought to give the impression that the ‘concerned’ constituency was more
widespread than it actually was.

Language of danger and fear
The promotional materials produced by the opponents of SHARE also
demonstrate the discursive links with their United States counterparts. A
brochure distributed at the first public meeting is indicative.

Let’s be frank. This program encourages sexual promiscuity.
You don’t give a person a gun and show them exactly how it’s
used unless you intend they use it – this sex course is exactly the
same.

While this pamphlet was distributed in South Australia, the notion of danger
invoked by the metaphor of the gun and the word ‘warning’ are typical of
Another flyer, distributed by a Liberal member of federal Parliament to her
South Australian constituents, ‘WARNED!’ in red letters that ‘The following
material may offend some people. It is disclosed only in the interests of
informing parents of what their children may be exposed to if the trial (of the
SHARE) programme goes ahead’ (Draper, 2003).

The impact of such rhetoric on communities can be unpredictable and difficult
to control (Irvine, 2004: 180). The publication of a series of anonymous
anti-SHine SA advertisements in a newspaper in rural South Australia in
September 2003 illustrates this point. The advertisements stated that the SHARE
Program would expose children to ‘EXPLICIT SEXUAL MATERIAL’ and that
‘the Education Department (was trying to) STEAL your children’s innocence’
(Port Lincoln Times, Sept, 2003). The concerns of a teacher from the town
were relayed to a member of the Legislative Council (Parliamentary Debates SA,
Legislative Council, September, 22, 2003–04: 139) who reported that

...homophobic hatred is fuelling the campaign of
misinformation, fear and alarm. They (opponents of SHARE)
not only place people who may be gay, lesbian or bisexual at
great personal risk...but also Education Department teachers
and staff of Shine SA are likely to be exposed to even more
violence and harassment.

Another teacher, reflecting on a personal experience of teaching in the SHARE
program, stated

...I ended up taking three weeks stress leave over it at a later
time. It just got to me that I couldn’t walk down the street, I
couldn’t go have a beer at the football club.

(Johnson, 2006: 21)
By September 2003 media attention to the SHARE program subsided. There is anecdotal evidence that ‘key newsrooms in Adelaide (ABC radio and television, and The Advertiser newsrooms) had ‘tired’ of the overload of press releases emanating from the opponents of SHARE’ (Johnson, 2006: 26). However SHARE was on the agenda again in December when the then Shadow Minister for Education and Children’s Services and Liberal member of Parliament, Vickie Chapman, put a motion to the South Australian House of Assembly to ‘immediately withdraw the trial of the Sexual Health and Relationships Education Program developed by SHine from all 15 participating schools pending professional assessment and endorsement’ (Parliamentary Debates SA, House of Assembly, December 4, 2003–04: 1108). That motion was debated on December 4th and, while it did not go to a vote, the debate provides an insight into parliamentarians’ views on the issue.

Supporters of the motion drew attention to the public meetings, letters from parents and a petition signed by more than 6000 people. They argued that the program had not been reviewed by experts in the field, the research literature had been ignored, teachers were not well-enough versed in developmental psychology to teach the program and it was ‘a recipe for litigation’. One parliamentarian indicated that the people he had shown the program to (parents and older teenagers) were ‘disgusted by the content’ (Parliamentary Debates SA, House of Assembly, December 4, 2003–04: 1110). Others suggested that the program needed to be assessed by an ethics committee, and that its content had not been made public.

Speakers who supported the SHARE program, some of whom were Liberal members of state Parliament, made the following points: SHARE had been endorsed by the Australian Medical Association following review by a specialist in adolescent psychiatry; evidence from recent national surveys on the proportion of high school students who were sexually active demonstrated that young people needed access to accurate sexuality information; SHARE had been highly successful in participating schools; there was strong support of parents of children in the program—‘The uptake of the program is almost 100 per cent’; and that the program reflected ‘mainstream contemporary social views and sexual mores’. In relation to the latter, one Parliamentarian commented on the links with the American Puritan tradition evident in ‘the calls of the anti-SHine campaigners for its replacement with a US developed sex education program of abstinence’ (Parliamentary Debates SA, House of Assembly, December 4, 2003–04: 1114). Supporters of SHARE also spoke of the need to counter homophobia in schools. One recalled his own school days and the bullying of a Malay classmate ‘because he was different in skin colour and mannerisms. The physical attacks on this boy were both homophobic and racist.’ (Parliamentary Debates SA, House of Assembly, December 4, 2003–04: 1114).

Irvine points out that conflicts about programs that discuss lesbian and gay identities are ‘far more than local school wars; rather they constitute a version of citizenship politics. They are battles not simply about homosexuality, but over which sexualities and which citizens are valued as legitimate.’ (Irvine, 2004:
167). To the extent that the challenge to the SHARE Program was to do with its inclusion of sexual diversity and its intent to prevent discrimination against gay, lesbian and bisexual young people, the opposition it encountered was indeed about ‘which citizens are valued as legitimate’. But it was more than that. It was also about which curricula should be taught in state schools: comprehensive sex education or abstinence-only.

While the critics of SHARE did not succeed in eliminating the program, the government was concerned enough to make some changes to Teach it like it is, the teacher training resource. The final version saw a reduction of the number of scenarios featuring same-sex couples and included ‘a set of principles for the program that included delaying intercourse and highlighted the important role of parents’, although these changes did not substantially alter the program (Gibson, 2007: 247). The option of abstinence was already in the program and parents were seen as having an important role from the outset, via their participation on health and wellbeing committees in participating schools and homework activities.

An international agenda?

Buss and Herman argue that the US Christian Right’s domestic agenda is ‘intimately locked into a global program of action’ (Buss and Herman, 2003: xv). While the controversy over the SHARE program might have been idiosyncratic to South Australia, the similarity between the strategies used by opponents of SHARE and those of the United States-based Christian Right suggests a broader political agenda. The controversy coincided with the Family First Party’s bid for political power in Australia. From its beginnings in 2001, Family First has quickly become a national contender, gaining a seat in the Federal Senate in 2004. During the 2004 election, newspapers reported on the connections between the Family First Party and the Assemblies of God Church, but Family First sought to distance itself from the Christian Right (Mullane, 2004; Maddox, 2005). During the election preference deals were struck between Family First and candidates from other political parties. It therefore may not be a coincidence that the abortion debate was re-opened as one of the first items of business after the 2004 federal election and that abstinence-only sex education was considered as a possibility, albeit briefly, during the development of the current HIV/AIDS strategy (Wroe, 2005).

While the national leadership has changed with the election of a Labor government in November 2007, the emergence of US-style culture wars in Australia, wherein a small but noisy, well-organised and well-funded group makes use of church networks to give the appearance of widespread support for its cause, is reason for concern.

Young people in Australia generally enjoy better sexual health than their counterparts in the United States. Nevertheless, recent Australian research shows there is a continued need for sexuality information, education and sexual health
services (Hillier and Mitchell, 2008; Kang and Quine, 2007; Skinner, 2003). For example, while the situation is improving, there is still a need to counter homophobia in schools (Hillier et al, 2006).

The internationalisation of right-wing politics however, carries with it an agenda which is hostile to comprehensive sex education. While the political influence of the Christian Right may ebb and flow, the potential is there for it to have long-term negative effects on young people’s sexual health and wellbeing. It is therefore vital that Australian policy makers carefully weigh up the evidence when making decisions about young people’s sexual health and that communities are aware of the strategies that may be deployed locally by conservative groups to advance the Christian Right’s global agenda.

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