

AFA President's Report Annual General Meeting 2018

Introduction

Firstly, I'd like to thank everyone who has contributed to the numerous efforts of outreach and communication, finance and management that has constituted the work of the AFA since the past AGM. I am saddened to announce that my work and study commitments (which now includes not only tertiary teaching and the intensive second year of a PhD with a practicum component) prevent my not only attending but continuing in the role of President of the AFA.

What follows is a summary of the major activities since the last AGM.

Census 2016 Results

One of the major events post-census were the results of the census, and over a dozen interviews via radio, TV and print were conducted by AFA representatives (myself and the previous Vice Presidents) throughout May-July. For the first time in Australia's history the number of people who claimed "no religion" has overtaken the Catholic religion, with "no religion" rising from 22.6 per cent to 29.6 per cent — nearly double since 2001.

While "no religion" covers a number of responses (not just atheist, but agnostic, skeptical, rationalist, just plain 'not a member of any organised religion', etc.), the indication of the rise of the category will doubtless continue to have ramifications in Australian culture and society. The support of those who helped promote and support (such as the fundraising campaign) the 'no religion' advertising campaign is particularly appreciated.

Global Atheist Convention 2018 and Cosmic Shambles Live AU/NZ Tour 2017

It is unfortunate that after a strong indication of enthusiasm and interest in the return of the Global Atheist Convention (GAC) in 2018, the ticket sales did not meet expectations to make the event viable. The Cosmic Shambles Live Tour in 2017 featured excellent presenters, content and entertainment internationally (with the tour heading to New Zealand as well as across Australia) and while the response by those who attended was enthusiastic, the financial results were less encouraging.

The AFA Committee worked very hard on promoting both events, with professional consultants coordinating social media advertising, and continual effort by general public and committee members through raising awareness via interviews, emails, word-of-mouth, media releases, etc. Everyone who lent a hand in making the proposal, financing, planning and execution should be commended.

While Ayaan Hirsi Ali sincerely apologised for not being able to present at the GAC in 2018 as originally intended (the reason being was her second pregnancy, which we kept confidential as per her wishes, and it has only been publically revealed by her husband in March 2018, via an interview [Q&A with Niall Ferguson on C-Span]), we continued to make an effort to promote diversity and local talent as much as possible in the convention line-up. We continue to be very proud of the mixture of established and up-and-coming names we promoted; it was indeed unique.

The backlash against women speakers who were to appear at the GAC was unexpected. It was also personally distressing not only to see the negative treatment of our much-valued potential presenters and moderators on social media, but also the AFA committee in general (including myself), who continue to be persistently targeted with online and real-world harassment by people who otherwise claim to support the same secular causes such as equality, humanism, rationalism and skepticism. As a result, it was a significant factor in my choosing to retire from the AFA. However, we all hope that future events and outreach efforts for the cause will recognise that there is a necessity for continued activism in atheism regarding gender equality and diversity, in order to be relevant and sustainable. Progress is persistent.

While suggestions were made for alternative arrangements for the GAC, the circumstances such as funding and venue requirements and timing of the event were unable to be altered. Even though the AFA committee and volunteers were freely donating their time and skills to work at both the Cosmic Shambles and GAC events, both Cosmic Shambles Live and the GAC could not be run for free or broadcast online for free (or even have the GAC only run for one day instead of two), as the presenters and travel arrangements, venue organising and catering, etc., all required payment and coordination.

While there was disappointment about the cancellation, and sadness at being unable to fulfill a tradition that many of us have previously participated in, we primarily regretted not being able to bring the fine presenters to the stage for the pleasure of those who were eager to support it, and who made plans accordingly.

The tremendous efforts we made with the smaller Cosmic Shambles tour indicated that there was seemingly less support for major events that foregrounded rationalism, humanism and skepticism, etc. Perhaps the cancellation of the GAC was an inevitable result of not only financial issues for previously keen attendees, but also the rise in alternative not-atheist / not-skeptic events that now take precedence.

It may also be suggested, with reference to the 2017 Census results, that being 'not religious' in Australia is seen as less unusual in comparison to 2012 and that influences the desire to hear speakers on topics about the potential ramifications of being 'not religious'. Yet the ongoing efforts in secular activism, political equality and social justice in other arenas (such as the challenges to the chaplaincy program and Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse) make the case that it is not that simple.

We thank everyone who has supported and taken part in the past with these events, and hope that the spirit of the GAC will continue in some other form.

United Nations Complaint Regarding Advertising of the Global Atheist Convention 2010

We received a notification on April 27th, 2018 from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations) in response to a complaint made by then President of the AFA, David Nicholls in June 2010. The complaint was regarding the right to advertise banners promoting atheism as a manifestation of freedom of religion, as per the Global Atheist Convention in several states of Australia. The UN committee in several parts concluded that the author (the then-President of the AFA) failed to sufficiently substantiate the claims for purposes of admissibility under articles 2 and 3 of the Optional Protocol.

Despite the committee's conclusion that the complaint was inadmissible due to evidentiary reasons, the long-term and detailed work that was done on behalf by DLA Piper Australia was first rate and greatly appreciated. The findings can be made available on request of the AFA.

AFA Submission to the Religious Freedom Review 2018

There were some 16,750 submissions to the Religious Freedom Review lead by the Hon Philip Ruddock. The AFA made a submission, which features on both our website and was broadcast via social media. A few parties were invited to discussions with the panel including the AFA.

Two people represented the views of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, Steve Marton, also President of Sydney Atheists, and Dean Stretton a barrister from Phillip St Sydney at a hearing on Friday 23rd of February. Both Sydney Atheists and Dean Stretton made submissions in addition to the AFA. A third person was invited to present and answer questions at the same time, Nathan Zamprogno. His submission included information regarding the Cult Information and Family Support organisation.

On this occasion only two panellists were present, Philip Ruddock and Nicholas Aroney. The discussion, questions and comments were all made in a convivial and respectful atmosphere at which the three atheists put their views robustly. The submissions were expanded upon, discussed and clarified. We made very clear that there should be more protection from religions rather than providing greater scope for religions to discriminate or challenge the rationally determined laws of the state. Examples were provided to the panel where religions' behaviours are inappropriate. We await with keen interest, the outcome of the panel's findings, deliberations and recommendations; thanks to Steve, Dean and Nathan for helping represent the AFA at the meeting.

Conclusion

Finally, it's been particularly difficult with what seems to be a trend towards people being busy with life and work, and there have been a number of people who have left the AFA Committee for numerous reasons. This is also reflected in the reduction of number of reports. As a result, we have made an effort to find qualified, experienced volunteers who are able to help with roles required. It may be that this is the last AGM held by not only myself in absentia, but also for the AFA on the whole.

Whatever the outcome, overall, I commend the various committee reports to you and thank all committee members for their contribution to the management of the Foundation.