

Rationalist Society

Annual Report 2019-20

Introduction

This year RSA was delighted to welcome Associate Professor Luke Beck, already an RSA Fellow, to the board. Luke's book, *Religious Freedom and the Australian Constitution*, makes him Australia's go-to expert on section 116 of the constitution (the 'religion clause'), and he's well known for his views published in the media.

We also welcomed Brendan Liveris, a corporate executive with responsibility for sustainability; Chris Botha, a senior economist; and Stella Thomas, who until recently was chief operating officer for her family's truck repair business but who has long been an activist lobbying against scripture classes in South Australian government schools.

Thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, board meetings are now routinely conducted using Zoom and this means we'll be able to seek new board members from states other than Victoria to make our organisation truly national.

During the year, the federal government introduced its response to the Ruddock Inquiry into Religious Freedom in Australia - the *Religious Discrimination* bill. We were grateful to RSA's Patron, Michael Kirby, for heading our campaign against this unnecessary, unwelcome and unwise bill.

Campaigns



Freedom of Religion and Belief

Speaking of COVID-19, one of its positive effects has been to place the highly divisive *Religious Discrimination* bill on the federal government's backburner - at least for now.

During the year, RSA formed an alliance with a number of other freethought groups to campaign against the bill and commissioned a national public relations firm to assist us.

In February 2020 we organised a successful launch at parliament house of the "*Don't Divide Us*" campaign, spearheaded by RSA Patron Michael Kirby.

Since then, we have been steadily building up subscribers to our professionally designed [#Don't Divide Us website](#) in preparation for the time when the government finally introduces the *Religious Discrimination* bill.

While the federal bill is on the backburner, One Nation's Mark Latham has introduced a very similar bill into the NSW parliament.

NSW is one of only two states that does not prohibit discrimination on the ground of religion (the other is South Australia).

RSA supports a correction to this anomaly but rejects Mark Latham's proposed *Religious Freedoms bill*, which like the federal *Religious Discrimination bill*, essentially give people a licence to *discriminate* rather than banning discrimination on the ground of religion.

Teaching our Worldview



Working in collaboration with Humanists Victoria, we have made solid progress on developing a curriculum for Australian middle schools over the last year. The Steering Committee agreed that rather than confusing the intended audience (teachers and students) with the complexities of humanism vs rationalism vs secularism, we would simplify things by referring to our worldview as 'secular humanism'.

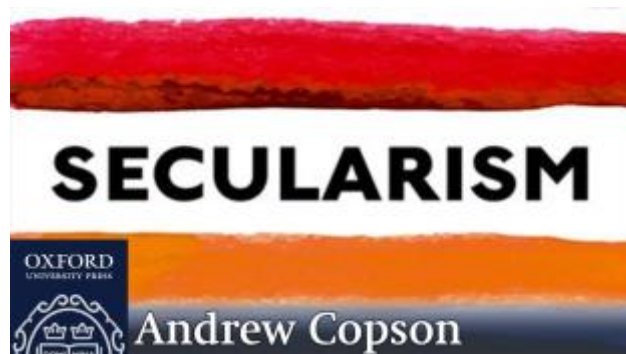
The Secular Humanism Curriculum project is divided into two stages. Phase 1 focuses on getting the fundamentals in place: definitions, a brief history of secular humanism, some examples of secular humanists; a matrix that shows how materials to be developed in Phase 2 would slot into Australian school curricula (initially Victoria, Queensland and the ACT); and how we might market the materials in the future. This phase was completed in August 2020.

Phase 2 will focus on the development of educational materials that illustrate how secular humanism can help people deal with ethical dilemmas in contemporary society - issues such as Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Religion and Belief, Equality, and Human Rights. This second phase will proceed over 2020-21.

Video: [What is Secularism - and what isn't it?](#)

1. Secularism is a *political principle* that supports pluralism and protects everyone from discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. Religionists can be secularists, just like the non-religious.
2. Fundamental freedoms like freedom of thought, religion and belief, and freedom of speech and expression, are based on secularism. Historically, the principle of secularism has settled religious wars and prevented sectarian violence.

3. Countries like China and the former USSR are *not* secular; they have political ideologies that operate much like a religion. Some countries are becoming more secular; others, like Turkey and India, are unfortunately repudiating their secular constitutions.
4. In some countries, secularism is written into a nation's constitution; in others, there may be an established church but the principle of secularism influences social values and behaviours. Secularism can shape a nation's schools, healthcare systems, lawmaking, and court systems. It's a principle that *makes a difference*.



Chaplaincy Challenge

RSA continues to challenge the legitimacy of the overtly discriminatory National School Chaplaincy Program.

Having successfully forced the Victorian Government to amend its public statement about the Chaplaincy Program to acknowledge that persons of *no faith* are eligible for funding, RSA has continued to pursue the government over its inaction regarding the implementation of this policy.

An investigation by the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission discovered seven chaplaincy providers that continue to impose (unlawful) religious selection criteria on chaplaincy jobs. We continue to pursue both the Commission and the Government to ensure this program is finally rid of its overt religious discrimination.

On the hospital chaplains front, we had a win.

RSA complained to Safer Care Victoria (the state's healthcare quality and safety agency) over their public endorsement of guidelines that restrict chaplain jobs and volunteers in public hospitals to people with religious affiliations. In response, they revised their guidelines to read that chaplains "may be of any faith or no faith."

Secular 'chaplains'

And there was great progress during the year with the Australian Navy announcing they will integrate new "Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officers" into their workforce alongside religious chaplains.

More than 50 per cent of permanent members of the Australian Defence Force now identify as non-religious (a trend only likely to increase in the future) and 95 per cent of a chaplain's job is spent on non-religious pastoral care and wellbeing support. These new Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officers are therefore both sensible and necessary.

We look forward to similar enlightened action by the Airforce and Army.

Prayers Before Parliament

Luke Beck's research project on *Prayers in Local Councils* continues; the data collection has been done and will be correlated with local population religiosity data. A legal analysis of the lawfulness of councils conducting Christian-only prayers will follow.

What does a prayer before a council meeting sound like? Watch one at Redland City Council, a short distance south-east of Brisbane in Queensland.

"Oh Lord of heaven and earth, I come to you and I bring the leaders in our council to you in this season, and the next season, and the next season, Lord."

"And Lord, I just pray for your blessing over this meeting .. Lord, I release your anointing power, your healing power so he can get through this meeting .."



1 - Click to view the video

National Redress Scheme

The National Redress Scheme was set up by the federal government in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

By 30 June 2020, institutions named in the Royal Commission were supposed to have voluntarily signed up to the Scheme but dozens chose not to. The government warned those institutions would be publicly named (and therefore shamed) but RSA called for more. In our view they should be:

- disqualified from tax exemptions otherwise available to charities, and
- disqualified from tendering for government contracts, and
- subject to a financial penalty of 150 per cent of the amount they would otherwise contribute to the National Redress Scheme.

Outreach

Public meetings

Our monthly MeetUps have continued but on Zoom, making them accessible to a much wider audience.

Topics over the past year have included:

- the *Religious Discrimination* bill
- political correctness
- the death penalty
- Universal Basic Income; and
- whistleblowers.

Thanks to member Rosemary Watson for stepping into the role of Meetups co-ordinator.

Print publications

We've covered most of the big issues over the past 12 months ...

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Volume 115

December 2019

AUSTRALIAN

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SWIMMING BETWEEN THE FLAGS

A rational response to Identity Politics

- The dire implications of attacking Julian Assange
- The frailty of genius
- Transmutation in the twenty first century?
- A population surprise

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2 - A rational response to Identity Politics

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BEING IN TIME

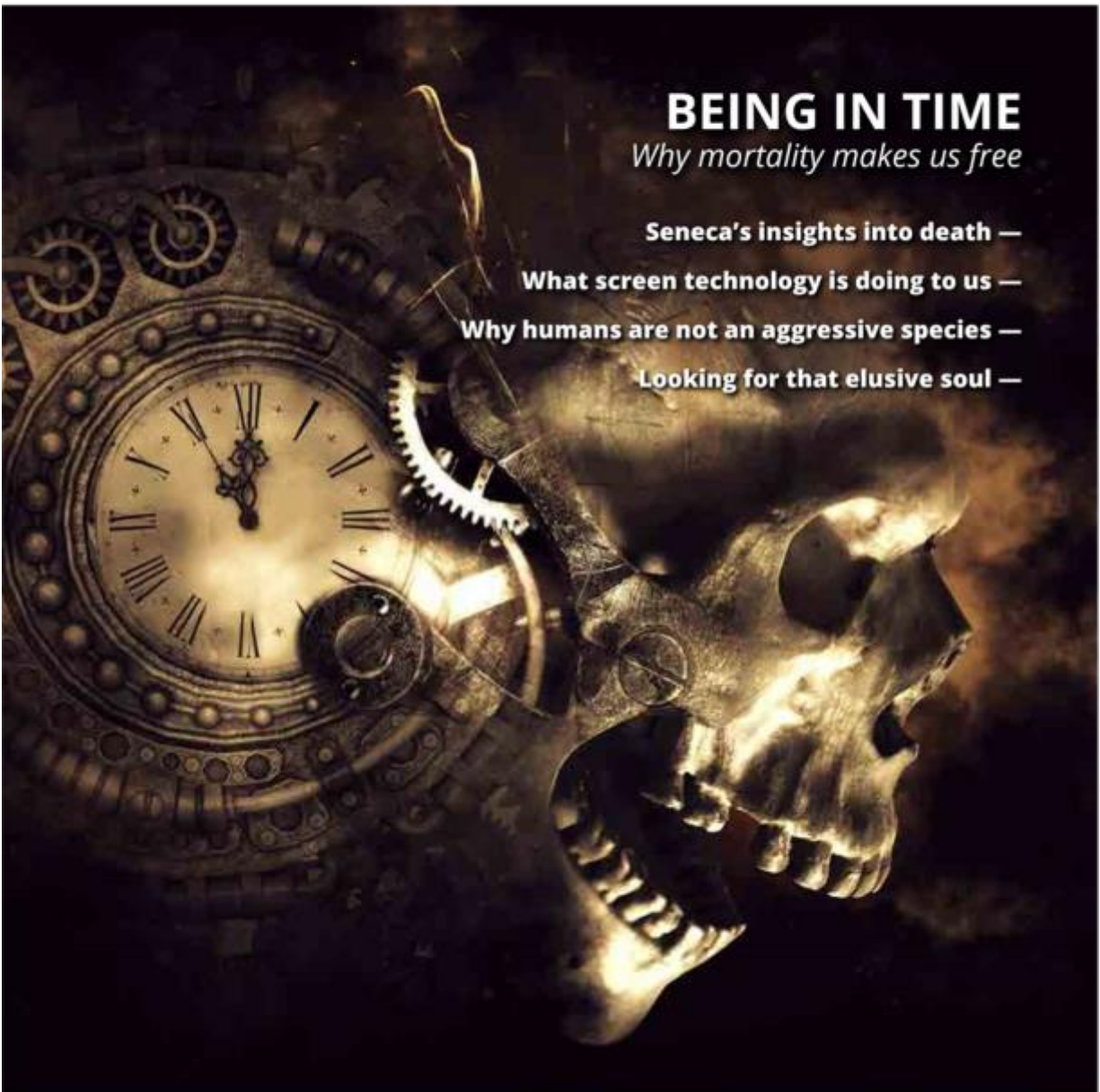
Why mortality makes us free

Seneca's insights into death —

What screen technology is doing to us —

Why humans are not an aggressive species —

Looking for that elusive soul —



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3 - Death and mortality

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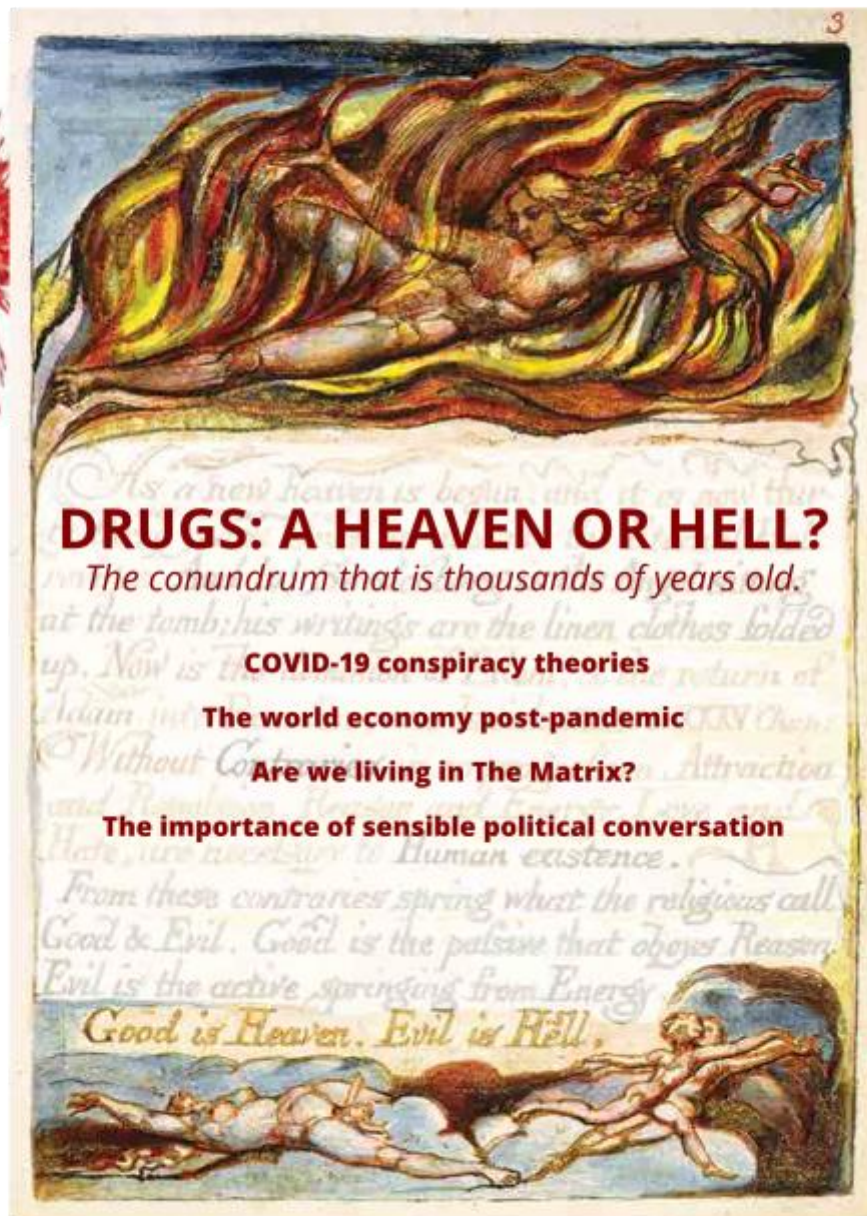
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4 - Drugs: heaven or hell?

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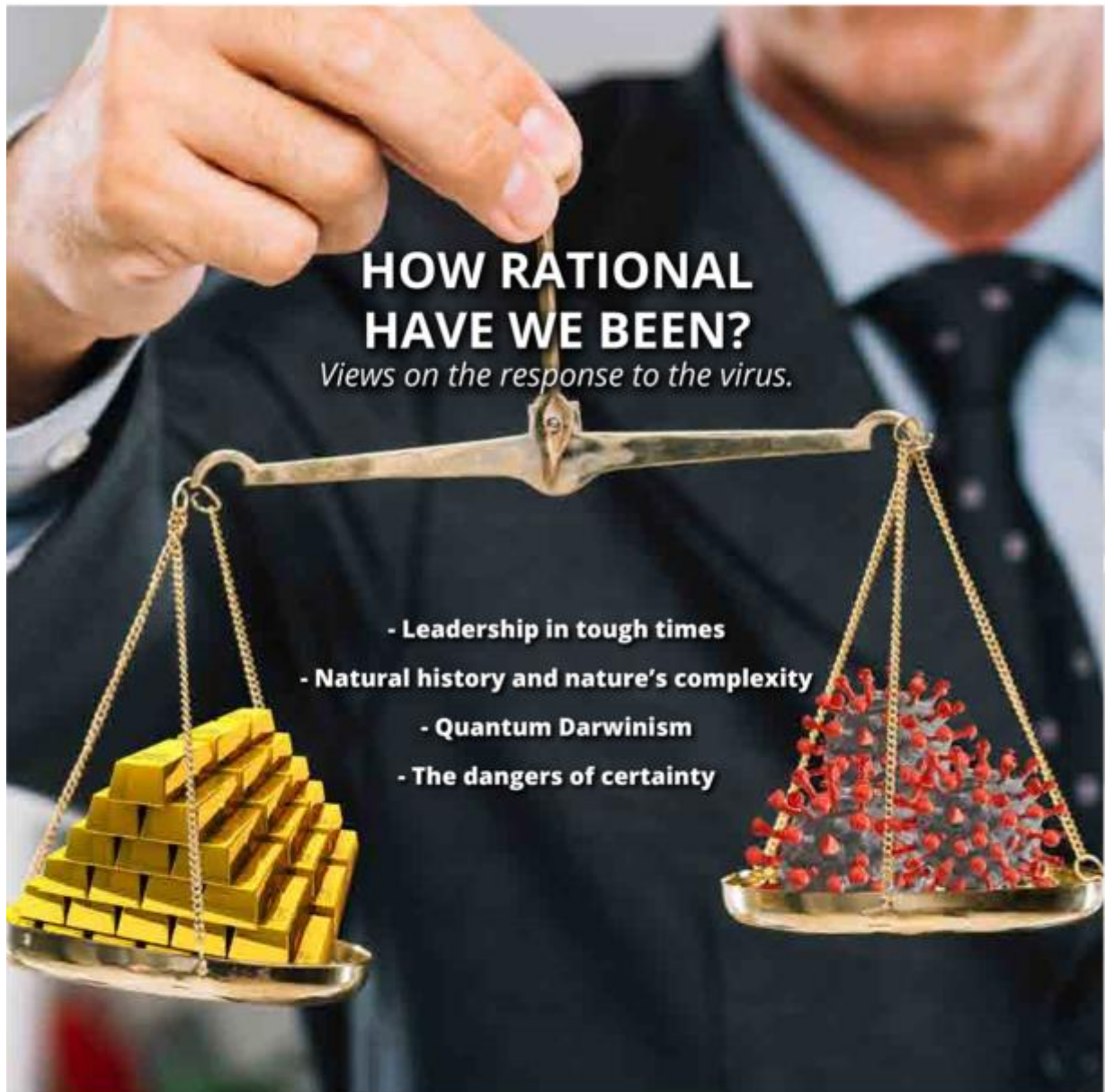
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5 - Post-pandemic futures

As members may know, the Rationalist Society has published a quarterly journal almost continuously since the 1920s, interrupted only by the Second World War, internecine strife and lack of funds.

While we are committed to continuing publication, the journal represents a significant impost on RSA funds. The net cost is around \$50,000 pa.

Over the next 12 months, the board will look at how we can reduce this cost while continuing the tradition of publishing the *Australian Rationalist*.

Electronic publications



The RSA maintains a reasonably active presence on Facebook and Twitter, with daily posts to both.

We have commissioned a review of our social media presence, with a view to making more effective use of social media advertising.

Our bulletin *RSA Daily* continues to attract subscribers, albeit at a lower rate than last year (up 10%, from 703 to 773).

Governance and Management

The RSA Board meets monthly during the year, with the Financial Advisory Committee and the Editorial Committee meeting on a quarterly basis.

Vice-president Leo Brewin has decided not to renominate for the board to spend more time on other interests, but thankfully he has agreed to continue his guiding role on the Curriculum Steering Committee. Our Treasurer, Nick Lee, has also decided to step back from the board and we thank him for stepping into the role following the unexpected death of our previous treasurer, Len Buller.

Under secretary Chris Noonan's guidance, we have upgraded our membership system so that most new member applications and renewals happen automatically in the background, with only a few anomalies to manage on an individual basis.

During the year we tested the 'Boardable' platform for board meetings, and have now made a longer-term commitment to using it. Among other benefits, Boardable provides:

- unlimited storage of relevant documents in a single place
- agenda templates and minutes of meetings

- the capacity to allocate tasks and report on the progress of their completion
- the ability to decide matters between meetings using polls
- internal hosting of discussion threads between board meetings.

Financials

In 2011, after a 12-month fight with the previous regime, we rescued dwindling Rationalist funds from the incompetent management of the prior Rationalist Association. Since then, RSA has followed a 'passive' investment strategy via the diversified Vanguard Growth Index Fund. This ensured a professionally balanced range of investments, with 70% in shares and 30% in bonds, plus low management fees. It has proven to be a remarkably successful strategy, returning an average of nearly 9% over the last 10 years.

However, at the 2019 AGM, member Ralph Catts asked whether RSA invested its funds 'ethically'. The question took us a bit by surprise but Ralph followed up his question with a constructive and useful briefing paper. Responding to this, over the past year the Financial Advisory Subcommittee (FAS) has carefully researched the performance of ethical investments, their risk vs their returns, and other financial factors such as tax implications and the value of franked dividends that might be foregone.

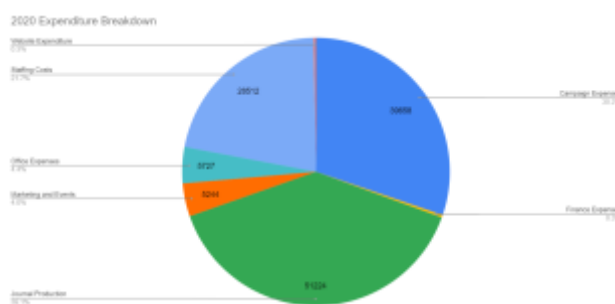
As a result of these careful deliberations, FAS recommended and the RSA board agreed to reallocate its investments into two different Vanguard Funds:

1. 50% into the Vanguard *Ethically Conscious* International Shares Index Fund
2. 50% into the Vanguard *Balanced* Index Fund.

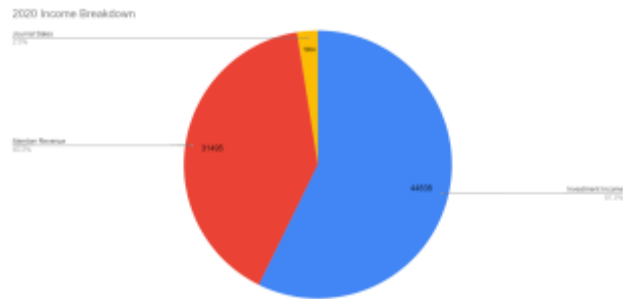
The first means we now invest at least half our funds in an ethical manner (excluding fossil fuels, nuclear power, alcohol, tobacco, gambling, weapons, adult entertainment and companies that are involved with 'severe controversies'.)

It was thought prudent, in this period of extreme volatility, to place the other half with a *balanced* fund to avoid over-exposure to shares by including some exposure to the more conservative bond market.

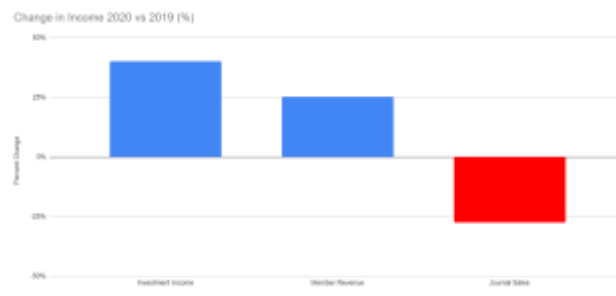
Meeting quarterly, the FAS will monitor these allocations over the next 6-12 months and adjust if necessary.



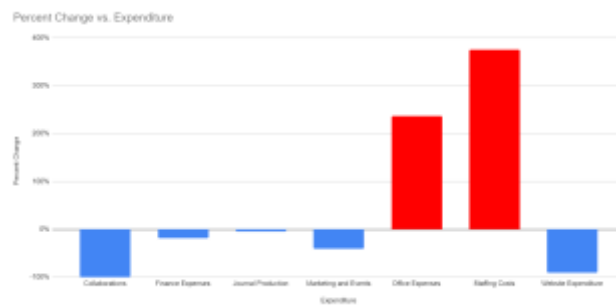
6 - Main expenditures



7 - Main sources of income



8 - Investment income and member income up; journal sales down



9 - And there was a very significant increase (up nearly \$40K) in expenditure on Campaigns

The RSA's annual financial statements for the 2019-20 financial year can be seen [here](#).

Board Nominations

The RSA Rules allow for up to seven to be nominated to the board. Nominations have been received from:

1. Professor Luke Beck (Vic)
2. Chris Botha (Vic)
3. Vicki Caulfield (Western Australia)

4. Dr Meredith Doig (Vic)
5. Brendan Liveris (Vic)
6. Chris Noonan (Vic)
7. Stella Thomas (South Australia).

Patrons and Fellows



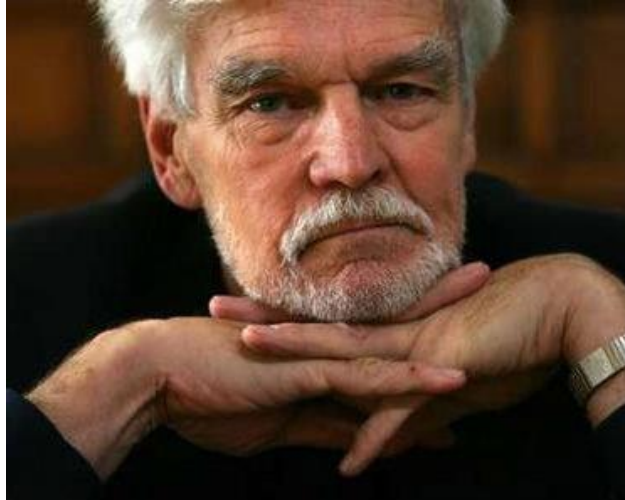
10 - Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG



11 - Hon. Gareth Evans AC QC



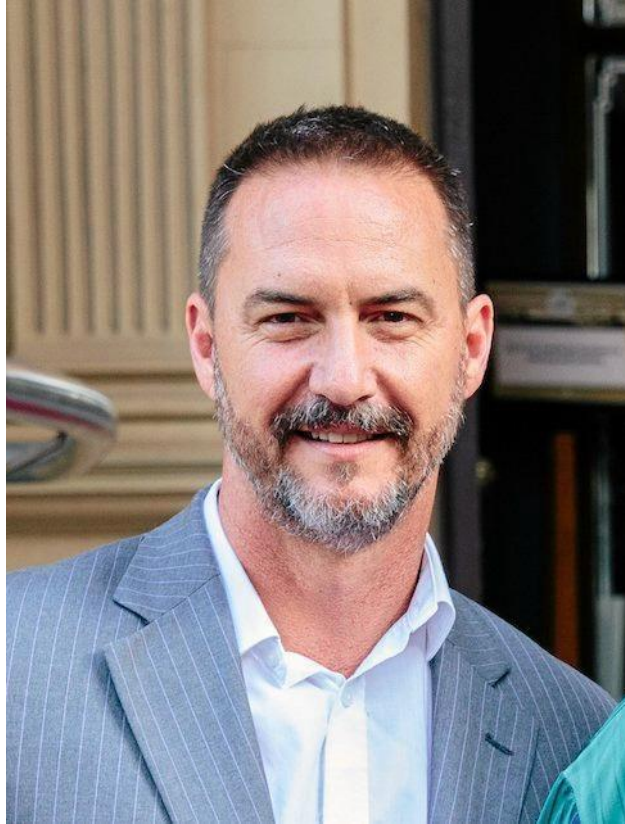
12 - Prof. Fiona Stanley AC FAA



13 - Dr Rodney Syme AM



14 - Dr Paul Monk, public intellectual



15 - Dr Peter Ellerton, Critical Thinking specialist



16 - With many thanks to outgoing board members Leo Brewin and Nick Lee, and the many RSA members and subscribers who make all this worthwhile.