



Annual Report 2021-22

Rationalist Society of Australia

Introduction

Vale Dr Rodney Syme

Before anything else, I am sure all Rationalists would join with me to pay tribute to Dr Rodney Syme, who died in October last year after a relatively short illness. Rodney was not only a valued patron of the RSA but a colleague of mine on the Dying With Dignity Victoria board and a personal friend.



For more than 30 years, Rodney campaigned relentlessly to give terminally ill patients the right to die with dignity and of course, he eventually achieved that outcome in Victoria in 2019. True to form, Rodney was writing yet another book when he died, focusing on the need to continue the campaign to ensure legislation will eventually include those suffering intolerably from untreatable mental illnesses or dementia. That book will be published in the coming year by Dying With Dignity Victoria.

Progress over the year

Last year we were in the throes of the COVID pandemic and like most organisations, RSA was forced to go online. For a society that aspires to represent all Rationalists and secular humanists across the nation, this has proved to be a good move.

Unlike in the past, the RSA board now has members from a range of Australian cities (Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne), and we continue to meet monthly via Zoom. We have also organised monthly RSA webinars, with participants from locations as diverse as Far North Queensland and WA.

The RSA lobbies in 4 main areas (new areas marked in *italics*):

- **Human Rights** (Discrimination, Abortion, Dying with Dignity, Bodily Autonomy and Equal Marriage)
- **Science in Society** (Climate Change, Pseudoscience, Drug Law Reform, *Valuing Science* and Reason & Reasoning)
- **Secular Education** (Chaplaincy in Schools and Religious Instruction)
- **Secular Government** (the Census, Church-State Separation, Prayers in Government, Tax & Religion, *Religion in the Military, Integrity in Government and Truth in Political Advertising*).

Over the past 12 months, thanks mainly to our indefatigable Campaigns & Communications Coordinator, Si Gladman, we have significantly ramped up our activities, pumping out over 100 articles, media releases, submissions, letters to MPs and petitions. As you will read below, this activity has started to show results.

On the other hand, our finances have taken a dive. The market has been savaged over the last 12 months. After a bumper year in FY 2020-21, returns to our investments have halved. At the same time, we have increased expenditure, investing in a full-time staff member and high-quality publications.

The board has been actively seeking ways to increase our revenue and has embarked on a strategic review of the future for RSA. With members' approval of changes to the RSA Rules, we will be in a position to apply for Deductible Gift Recipient status over the forthcoming year.

Annual Report 2021-22

Campaigns



Census21

Last year, we reported on the efforts of a group of freethought organisations (the Atheist Foundation, the Sydney Atheists, Humanists Australia, Humanists Victoria, the National Secular Lobby and the RSA) that collaborated to produce a campaign leading up to the August 2021 Census.

The 'Census21 - Not Religious?' campaign was designed to encourage people, when responding to the census Religion Question, to reflect on whether they were actually religious, or just culturally so. Last year we wrote, "Just how effective the campaign has been in shifting the public's views won't be known until June 2022 when the Australian Bureau of Statistics will release the Census results."

The results exceeded our expectations!

There was a dramatic increase in the numbers consciously marking the No Religion box on the census, jumping from around 30% at the previous census to nearly 40% (38.9%). Numerous media articles covered these results, with RSA and other spokespersons for the campaign appearing in radio interviews and op ed articles.

Over the past 12 months, the group has continued its collaboration, developing a submission to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' review of how it defines religious affiliation and classifies religious groups. Among other things, the submission recommends:

1. The Religion Question be reworded to read, "What is the person's religion, if any?" (emphasis added)
2. What constitutes a religion should be more strictly confined to align with the High Court's definition - viz, belief in a supernatural being, thing or entity; plus acceptance of canons of conduct to give effect to such belief.
3. The ABS's use of the loose concept of 'religious affiliation' should be abandoned.

The ABS claims it collects statistics about religion to provide evidence to assist governments and other organisations to allocate scarce resources. If this is so, there should be much more resourcing accorded secular groups and causes and a declining amount accorded religious groups and causes. We continue to lobby for fair allocation of resources and 'voice' in public conversations.

Annual Report 2021-22

Religious Discrimination



Last year, we reported that the Coalition's Religious Discrimination bill had been effectively placed on the backburner during COVID. But it was revived in early 2022, and RSA, again collaborating with a range of freethought groups, operating as [#DontDivideUs](#), (Atheist Foundation, NSW Rationalist Association, Humanists Victoria, Sydney Atheists, Humanists Australia, National Secular Lobby, Australian Skeptics and Victorian Skeptics, Queensland Parents for Secular State Schools and Go Gentle Australia) collaborated on a joint submission to a senate committee reviewing a third draft of the bill.

Chaplaincy



As we reported last year, our efforts to challenge the overtly discriminatory National School Chaplaincy Program resulted in a number of state-based anti-discrimination / equal opportunity commissioners publicly stating their concerns about the Program.

Over the last 12 months, we have continued this long-term campaign, with pleasing results in Western Australia in particular. We supported the efforts of a group of concerned parents, who asked their school community if they were comfortable with the discrimination inherent in their school's chaplaincy role (they were not!) In the course of this campaign, we helped the parents raise public awareness of their position via a petition that gained over 20,000 signatures across Australia.

We also supported a local WA council in their decision to stop directing council funds to a Christian labour-hire firm for chaplains, providing the funds instead directly to schools. These developments gained significant media attention in the mainstream WA media and in radio interviews, with RSA mentioned or interviewed.

Since its inception in 2006, the Chaplaincy Program has directed more than \$1 billion of taxpayer funds to pay for religiously affiliated chaplains in government (and other) schools. Chaplains are not supposed to proselytise, but we know some of them do, and we know the Christian labour-hire firms that hire them use programs of 'professional development' to encourage them to lure students into religious programs out of school hours.

The Labor government has announced a return to the Gillard government's policy of extending this funding to non-religious applicants, but without reform to the dominant market position of Christian labour-hire firms, we believe schools will not, in practice, have much choice other than to use the existing structures. That's why we are urging the government to provide the funding directly to schools rather than to these third-party providers.

Annual Report 2021-22

Religion in the Military



One of our newer campaigns is reform in the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

We have highlighted the case of former top Navy chaplain, Collin Acton, who called for reform of the chaplaincy-based model of pastoral care and wellbeing support. We helped get wider mainstream media attention for Collin's cause, including in an article in the Canberra Times and interviews on ABC radio.

Our submission urged the Senate to reject the bill as currently drafted on the basis that the bill:

1. Emphasises positive religious freedom rather than freedom from discrimination.
2. Would override existing state-based anti-discrimination laws
3. Elevates protection of statements of religious belief above any other statements of belief
4. Protects the rights of religious bodies to hire and fire on religious grounds
5. Would allow corporate bodies (including religious corporate bodies) to sue (anti-discrimination laws usually only apply to individuals)
6. Equates religious belief to inherent characteristics such as age, sex and ethnicity.
7. Would empower religious cults.

In the lead up to the federal election in May 2022, the Religious Discrimination bill was finally debated and spectacularly imploded, with a number of government MPs crossing the floor to vote against it.

While we welcomed the demise of this unwelcome, unnecessary and divisive bill, it's not yet off the table. The incoming Labor government has promised to review it in due course, and we will need to make sure any new bill does not repeat the mistakes of the previous one.

Prayers before Parliament



Last year, we reported that we had been supporting councillors in a number of councils across Victoria and NSW to challenge the casual assumption that recitation of a Christian prayer at the beginning of council meetings is acceptable in these days of a much more pluralistic country.

Over the last 12 months, we have significantly ramped this campaign, with some significant positive results. In NSW, the Shoalhaven and Wagga Wagga councils of replaced their opening prayer rituals with more inclusive practices, and RSA was cited in local media coverage of the changes.

Annual Report 2021-22

We have also been lobbying at state and federal level, writing to MPs and the parliamentary presiding officers. Encouragingly, the incoming Labor president of the Senate announced her preference for replacing the prayer ritual soon after taking up her new role, and while this has not yet happened, the Senate did vote to change its opening procedures. An acknowledgement of country now precedes the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, and the prayer is introduced by the president inviting senators to "to pray or reflect in your own way on your responsibilities to the people of Australia and to future generations."

When Collin was the head of chaplaincy at the Navy, he was instrumental in having secular roles introduced into the Navy's chaplaincy branch, known as Maritime Spiritual Wellbeing Officers (MSWOs). When we noticed that Navy's job advertisements for the MSWO roles this year suddenly included a theology degree, we raised concerns directly with Deputy Chief of Navy Rear Admiral Christopher Smith. In his response, he agreed with our concerns and asked for theology to be removed from the job ads.

We have also written to the Defence and Defence Personnel ministers about this issue, along with a number of other MPs and senators. We have also requested documents under Freedom of Information laws.

Outreach

Webinars

During the 2021/2022 year, we held nine webinars, with guest speakers on a broad range of topics. These webinars typically attract between 50-100 registrants. The recordings are uploaded to YouTube, where they attract hundreds more viewers.

More recently, the topics of these webinars have aligned more closely with issues that we are campaigning on – such as 'religion in the military', 'truth in political advertising' and the Census campaign.

Publications

Last year we reported that RSA Fellow Neil Francis had delivered the first two of a set of three reports into *Religiosity in Australia*.

Part 1 deals with "Personal faith according to the numbers" and provides a comprehensive snapshot of the facts of Australians' religiosity - not the misleading picture suggested by biased census questions or by self-serving private surveys.

Part 2 deals with "Religious minds, religious collectives", with rigorous investigations into the nature of religions and the source of religiosity, the vexed category of "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) and the equally vexed challenge of religious conscientious objection.

Neil is now finalising Part 3, which will focus on "Religion & Morality".

Apart from being placed [on the RSA website](#), Neil's reports are also housed in [APO](#), an open access platform, which champions evidence-based decision-making. APO shows that Neil's reports have been downloaded nearly 200 times and shared over 100 times.

Annual Report 2021-22

RSA website

As mentioned in the Introduction, our Campaigns & Communications Coordinator, Si Gladman, has added over 100 articles to the RSA website, and we have also written to numerous ministers and MPs and made substantial submissions to:

- The Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide
- The parliamentary committee inquiring into the 2021 *Religious Discrimination bill*
- The Western Australian Law Reform Commission review of the *WA Equal Opportunity Act*
- The inquiry into *Ensuring Northern Territory Rights*
- The Senate Inquiry into *Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Press*.

We also were involved in mounting or supporting some very successful petitions on *change.org*:

- A petition to *Replace Prayers in Parliament* – which attracted nearly 6,500 signatures
- A petition to *Fund Youth Workers, not Faith Workers* – which attracted over 20,000 signatures.

Social Media

RSA is active on YouTube, producing more than 60 videos over the year, ranging from hour-long RSA webinars, to short and sharp subtitled clips that illustrate some of the challenges we face, to interviews with secular champions.

On Facebook and Instagram, we publish our articles and videos as part of our campaigns. Over the past year, visits to our Facebook page increased 116% and 207% for Instagram. Facebook new Likes almost doubled (+191%).

We are less active on Twitter, with an average of 15 new followers each month.

Rationale magazine

Last year, we announced the shift from publishing our long-standing hard copy journal, *The Australian Rationalist*, to an online magazine called *Rationale*.

While our lobbying activities are documented on our website, *Rationale* carries longer form articles from our regular columnists and guest writers. We also re-publish some pieces from other sites under the Creative Commons license.

Over the past 12 months, *Rationale* has published around 80 original articles on topics ranging from Business & Economics, Law & Politics, Philosophy & Psychology, Ethics & Religion. *Rationale* also re-publishes relevant articles from other sites, using the Creative Commons licence.

The reader audience varies but is typically around 3,000 a month.

Si Gladman has also produced 'The Secular Agenda' podcast, a series of interviews relevant to RSA's campaigning activities. This is available on major podcast apps and on the RSA website.

RSA Daily

Our daily bulletin, RSA Daily, has continued to grow over the past year, now with nearly a thousand (966) subscribers.

Readers still appreciate these bite-sized bulletins with their morning coffee:

Annual Report 2021-22

- *"As a recovering writer, I know how important feedback can be. So I must tell you that at two of the dinners I've been in Central Victoria over the past month, not one but two different people – one a man, the other a woman – have out of the blue mentioned how much they look forwards to reading RSA Daily every morning. Indeed they both raved a fair bit about how it provided a wonderful shortcut to the news and information that mattered. As I say, this was unprompted and said once the dinner party inevitably turned to politics and reason. Good on you." (Graham)*
- *"I really enjoy the feeds from RSA Daily, great variety of interesting material." (Mary)*
- *"Your email every morning is the first one opened. This sentence caught my eye (and mind) today: "Freedom of belief is absolute, freedom to express beliefs is properly limited by the rights of others." Thank you for clarifying something that is so obvious, but rarely said so succinctly." (Carsten)*
- *"I don't think I've ever disagreed with any of your comments on the news articles you link us to. As a matter of fact, I rather like them. I also appreciate the early morning work that you do finding what would be my preferred articles." (Con)*

Governance and Management

The RSA continues to be governed by a board of seven, meeting monthly via zoom. The board has been stable, with just one change during the year - Treasurer Brendan Liveris stepped down and his role has been assumed by strategic risk management consultant, Arash Rashidian.

All directors contribute their time, skills and efforts on a voluntary basis. The board now employs fulltime a Campaigns & Communications Coordinator, Si Gladman - who is also editor of our online magazine - and is supported by a (very) part-time bookkeeper and a fully qualified accountant who volunteers his time pro bono.

Always looking for ways to increase our revenue so that we can increase our impact, in December 2021 we commissioned consultants to advise on a professional fundraising campaign. We worked constructively with them for 4 months, using their well-trying-and-tested procedure, which included several gateway checkpoints. This first phase of the project was funded by a major donor, and not from RSA funds.

Major fundraising is a highly competitive endeavour and capturing the attention of major donors is a difficult exercise. Unfortunately, at one of the major gateway checkpoints, the board had to conclude there were insufficient major donors identified to be able to fund the next stages of the process and the project was discontinued.

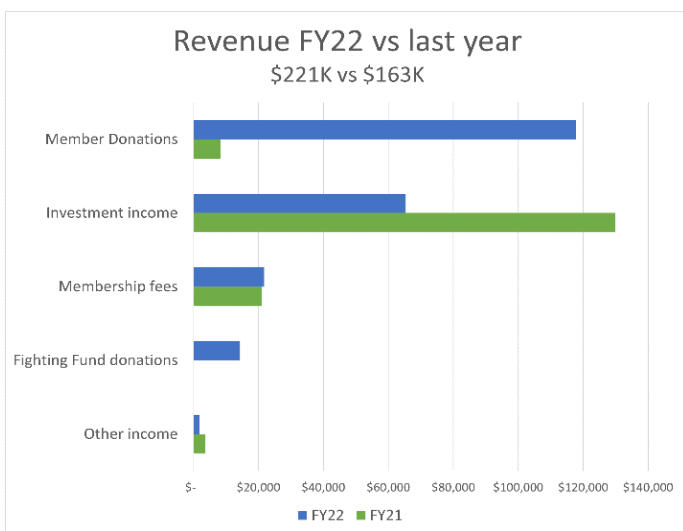
On a more positive note, we have worked with city law firm Minters on a 'low bono' basis to review the possibility of RSA achieving DGR (deductible gift recipient) status. If members approve the recommended changes to the RSA Rules at this year's AGM, we will be able to apply for DGR status, not for the whole of the RSA but for a new RSA research entity.

Under Arash Rashidian's expert strategic leadership, the board is now reviewing the future of the RSA.

Annual Report 2021-22

Financials

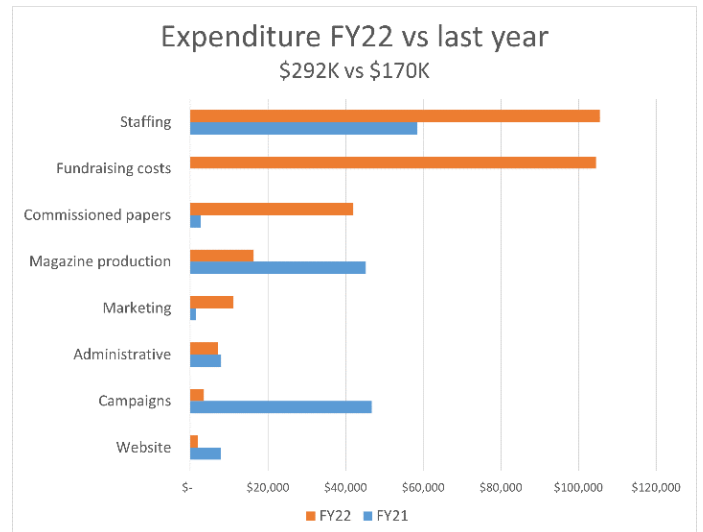
This year's revenue was around \$220,000, a significant improvement over last year's \$163,000. However, this outcome was heavily dependent on a significant donation from a single person - over \$100,000. Without this donation, revenue would have been about \$40,000 less than last year, a decrease of about 26%.



Compounding this problem, our investment income has been about half last year's income, due to poor market conditions.

Membership fees have remained about the same; and our new Fighting Fight has attracted nearly \$15,000.

Overall expenditure has increased about 70%, from \$170,000 to \$292,000 (although about \$100,000 of this was for the professional fundraising project, funded by a major donor).



Staffing costs have increased around 80% - due mainly to our Campaigns & Communications Coordinator moving from 4 days a week as a contractor to full-time as an employee (with all the associated on-costs that involves).

Reference to 'commissioned papers' refers mainly to the excellent Religiosity series by RSA Fellow Neil Francis.

As predicted, costs of magazine production have dramatically declined as we moved from hard copy format to our online Rationale magazine.

The significant increase in expenditure has meant we have had to draw down during the year on our investments, with total assets declining 24% from \$850,000 last year to \$645,000.