

## Parental rights and Bill 44

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“Parental rights”. Sounds good, doesn’t it? If nothing else, the religious right deserves credit for inventing catchy two-word slogans that have a virtuous tone, but mask the true meaning. “Intelligent design”, “school choice”, “family values”, “moral majority” are a few others.

Culture Minister Lindsay Blackett has stated that the party ran on “family values” in the last election. Really? Does he even know that the religious right uses this phrase as code for, among other things, opposing gay rights – the very rights he claims to defend?

Blackett argues that “parental rights” in Bill 44 is symbolic, since parents can already opt their kids out of class through the School Act. He expects that Albertans will be reasonable and that the proposed changes should not be taken literally, or there would be “anarchy.”

Symbolic? Sorry, Mr. Blackett, but why is the government so determined to pass this legislation as is, while ignoring the valid concerns raised by the media, the Alberta Teachers Association, the Chumir Foundation and parents of school children around the province. Why do you fight so hard to defend it in one breath, then in the next breath try to convince the public that it changes nothing?

Is this a grassroots movement of unconnected Alberta parents simultaneously deciding that parental rights need to be in our human rights legislation, or is it a “top-down” initiative with religious leaders and politicians pulling the strings behind closed doors?

### A religious right initiative imported from the US

To understand the parental rights initiatives we need to look south of the border. In the early 1990’s religious right groups saw “parental rights” legislation as a means to advance their causes by applying censorship in schools, limiting the ability of the government to prosecute child abuse, diverting money from public to religious schools, and weakening the curriculum for all children.

A 1996 report by People for the American Way, states:

[http://site.pfaw.org/site/PageServer?pagename=report\\_parental\\_rights](http://site.pfaw.org/site/PageServer?pagename=report_parental_rights)

In fact, parental rights initiatives would, by amending state constitutions, provide individuals with a vastly stronger legal weapon to challenge public school curricula and child abuse protection laws on political and sectarian grounds. The initiatives would jeopardize the ability of social service agencies to act effectively in cases of child abuse and neglect by making it more difficult to intercede on behalf of an abused child. The legislation would needlessly pit parents against parents, as well as against teachers and other child care professionals, calling on the federal courts to resolve disputes normally settled locally and without costly litigation. It would wreak havoc on public school curriculum by providing the means for individuals to block sexuality and AIDS education programs and other curricula they find objectionable not simply for their own children, but for other parents’ children as well. In short, the amendment is part of a larger right-wing assault on public education, and, as stated by some of its leading proponents, it paves the way for school voucher programs that would allow parents to divert scarce resources from public schools to private, including sectarian, schools.

Among the groups behind this initiative were James Dobson’s Focus on the Family, the Home School Legal Defense Association, and Pat Robertson’s The Christian Coalition.

## Lawyer's full-employment act

Also from the above report:

The potential for costly, repetitive and unnecessary lawsuits is in itself a cause for concern. Parental rights legislation is often characterized by opponents as a "lawyer's full-employment act," referring to the endless lawsuits that will result from such vaguely worded legislation. This is not a baseless concern, as even amendment proponents have stated that is their intent. Jeffrey Bell recently stated that the amendment was "meant to be general," and "meant to be argued out in court." Leah Delay, leader of the Colorado initiative effort, has stated, "If we're in court for the rest of our lives, thank goodness." Tom Tancredo, Independence Institute founder and leading parental rights amendment supporter, echoes this: "The reality is that almost everything [in the amendment] will have to be adjudicated." A lawyer for the Georgia-based Southeastern Legal Foundation, involved in that state's parental rights push, stated "We are out to make bad law in order to provoke legislatures to repeal bad laws."

The religious right groups in the US are extremely well funded and prepared to drag out legal battles that could have potentially devastating effects on teachers and public schools. In Canada, however, the human rights commissions must seem like a gift from heaven. The religious groups, fronted by compliant parents, would be able to launch human rights complaints against educators and have the taxpayer pick up their part of the tab.

## Public funding of religious schools

There is little doubt that religious groups see parental rights legislation as a back door to public funding for religious schools. These quotes are from the same report:

Clint Bolick, litigation director for the conservative Institute for Justice, which is aiding Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson in his attempt to expand the Milwaukee program to include sectarian schools, substantiates claims that the PRA would facilitate vouchers. At a recent Heritage Foundation panel discussion, he said that any law or constitutional amendment giving parents the power to "direct the upbringing" of their children could be a powerful tool for voucher proponents, because it would facilitate approval of vouchers in court. Further, the PRA is "a very harmonious, parallel movement" to the voucher movement. "You could win that battle [arguing voucher legislation on the basis of PRA] pretty swiftly."

Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, made the connection between PRAs and vouchers on a recent edition of the 700 Club, Pat Robertson's daily television show, saying "We believe that parents raise children, not government bureaucrats. And we believe that the parent-child relationship is the most sacrosanct relationship in our society, and we want the government to do something to protect it... The ultimate answer to that—the Parental Rights act is going to be a very important linchpin in this whole movement—but the ultimate answer is school choice. We've got to provide families with scholarships and vouchers so they can choose the best child [sic] for their school, private, public, and parochial."

Vouchers, where the government hands out education money for parents to spend at the school of their choice, have been pushed by evangelical groups in the US, Canada and other countries. They have strong support from the Fraser Institute, religious groups and various politicians. This is from a speech Ted Morton gave to the Howard Center's World Congress of Families in Geneva in 1999.

[http://www.worldcongress.org/wcf2\\_sprks/wcf2\\_morton.htm?search=morton&opt=EXACT](http://www.worldcongress.org/wcf2_sprks/wcf2_morton.htm?search=morton&opt=EXACT)

Parental child-care must be put on an equal tax footing with commercial or public daycare. So-called "public daycare" should be discouraged. Instead, tax-credits for child care should be equally available to all parents--both those who look after their own children and those who choose child care service of their choice.

The family-choice principle should be extended to primary and secondary education. This can be achieved easily and efficiently by expanding the school voucher programs. The state maintains responsibility for the universal availability of primary and secondary education, but parents are given the power to choose the kind of school they want. We know that state monopolies provide inferior service in every other field of human endeavor. Why do we continue to support it in education? This is especially true when we know that the New Egalitarians have targeted the public education system as a primary instrument for their social engineering.

The taxpayers of Alberta, of course, already bankroll religious schools – 100% in the case of Catholic and alternative schools, and 70% for private schools, up from 60% last year. If it becomes a human right for parents to demand education in accordance with their religious beliefs, they would have a strong case to demand 100% funding for private religious schools.

This has been a goal of various Christian schools in Alberta for some time. They don't like signing alternative agreements with public school boards to obtain 100% funding because they lose control to public boards. So the strategy is to get full funding for private religious schools so they can continue to teach creationism and discriminate against students and teachers on religious grounds. Bill 44, whether intentionally or not, could pave the path to 100% funding for private schools.

Along with Morton, four other speakers from the above World Congress are of particular note here – Darrel Reid, Michael Farris, Dallas Miller and Gwen Landolt.

Darrel Reid was formerly the president of Focus on the Family Canada, and rose rapidly through the Harper government to his current position as Deputy Chief of Staff in the PMO. FOF has been a consistently strong supporter of parental rights. One of his quotes is:

I think every Christian's under an obligation to change laws to reflect Biblical values.

Farris is one of the most important individuals in the parental rights initiative. He was involved with the failed 1996 attempt to pass this legislation in Colorado and is largely behind the current revival of the movement as head of Parentalrights.org (<http://www.parentalrights.org>). Much of this website is devoted to *fighting against children's* rights as expressed through the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

He is also chairman of the *Home School Legal Defense Association* (<http://www.hsllda.org>) which has a Canadian branch. Dallas Miller, from Medicine Hat, is the former chief counsel for HSLDA Canada and is now a Judge of the Court of Queen's Bench of Alberta.

Gwen Landolt is National Vice President of REAL Women of Canada and has frequently written about "values" issues, including parental rights.

## Tim LaHaye

It's difficult to discuss the US religious right movement without mentioning Tim LaHaye. He is best known as the author of the Left Behind series about doomsday prophecies, but more importantly he is the individual who established the religious right as a political force, convinced Jerry Falwell to establish the "Moral Majority" and played a pivotal role in putting

George W. Bush into the White House. He also helped found the Council for National Policy, a secretive group of wealthy evangelicals who fund religious right initiatives. He is a supporter of the parental rights movement and has exerted a large influence on Michael Farris.

Here is a Rolling Stone article on LaHaye

- [http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/5939999/reverend\\_doomsday/](http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/5939999/reverend_doomsday/)

Stephen Harper delivered a controversial speech to the CNP in 1997.

- [http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20051213/elxn\\_harper\\_speech\\_text\\_051214/20051214/](http://www.ctv.ca/servlet/ArticleNews/story/CTVNews/20051213/elxn_harper_speech_text_051214/20051214/)

## Curriculum

What does the science curriculum look like when it is dictated by religious right organizations? Consider this:

Biology for Christian Schools is a textbook for Bible-believing high-school students. Those who do not believe that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God will find many points in this book puzzling. This book was not written for them....

The same encyclopedia article may state that the grasshopper evolved 300 million years ago. You may find a description of some insect that the grasshopper supposedly evolved from and a description of the insects that scientists say evolved from the grasshopper. You may even find a "scientific" explanation of the biblical locust (grasshopper) plague in Egypt. These statements are conclusions based on "supposed science." If the conclusions contradict the Word of God, the conclusions are wrong, no matter how many scientific facts may appear to back them.

This is from a biology textbook used by many home schoolers and US schools belonging to the Association of Christian Schools International, the same organization affiliated with many faith schools in Alberta. Not surprisingly, science courses offered by ACSI were not recognized by the University of California, resulting in a lawsuit. The university won, but in Alberta, the clause "without academic penalty" in Bill 44 may lead to a different result.

The Fort McMurray Christian School has the following in its constitution:

We believe the Genesis account of creation is to be understood literally; that man was created in God's own image and after His own likeness; that man's creation was not by evolution or change of species or development through interminable periods of time from lower to higher form.

The statements of faith of the ACSI schools state that the bible is the inerrant, inspired word of god, that believers will enjoy eternity in heaven, that unbelievers will face eternal torture, that people are sinful by nature and are only saved from eternal damnation by their faith in Jesus Christ, whose return, by the way, is imminent.

As Stephen Colbert quipped recently, "The War on Science is the only war we're winning".

## Education – the main battleground of the religious right

The religious right is trying to increase their power and influence in a variety of ways, but by far the most important is in education. If religious groups are able to weaken public education by siphoning off even more money to religious schools, censoring the curriculum in subjects such as science, literature and history, and demoralizing public school teachers with human rights threats – they will win.

Already in Alberta we have the publicly-funded religious schools openly teaching creationism with the apparent blessing of the government. Evolution, on the other hand, has been censored out, with only a short mention in Biology 20 – and no discussion of human evolution. Bill 44 may well lead to more segregated sectarian schools, where children learn only what their religious parents want, from teachers that are chosen by a pastor based on their belief in the "inerrancy" of the Bible. They will be prevented from mixing and integrating with children from other ethnic or religious backgrounds. This is a recipe for future social unrest and economic stagnation.

An Angus Reid poll in 2008 shows a disturbing trend in Alberta. For the first time, the poll showed the number of people believing in Biblical creationism (40%) exceeding the number

accepting the science of evolution (37%). There is some question as to the margin of error due to small sampling sizes, but still this result is very troubling.

“Parental rights” is a smokescreen. Under Bill 44, parents, children, teachers and public schools are pawns in a larger battle and all will lose. The winners will be fundamentalist religious leaders who will increase their power in our education system to push their own agenda.

## Supplemental notes

The religious right is an incredibly complex movement with many leaders and many different goals. Some people undoubtedly are “mild” in their beliefs, and often identify with the religious right for single issues, such as fighting abortion or gay marriage. At the other end are the Dominionists and their even more extreme subgroup, the Reconstructionists, who seek to totally transform society along Biblical lines, i.e. theocracy (well, they call it “theonomy”).

Research into the religious right is made more difficult due to the secretive nature of some of the most important groups and coalitions – for example the Council for National Policy.

Religious right groups often present a reasonable, mild public image, but behind the scenes have a stronger agenda. A good example is the Discovery Institute, the headquarters of intelligent design. The 2005 Dover trial, where parents took the school board to court over the board’s attempt to introduce ID, exposed the deliberate deceptions of the ID movement. As well, the Discovery Institute’s infamous Wedge Document was leaked. It laid out their long-term goals of ID to transform politics, science and the arts along religious lines. Not surprisingly, the seed money for the Discovery Institute came from the Howard J. Ahmanson, who also funded Rousas Rushdoony, the founder of Reconstructionism. Rushdoony represents the most extreme wing of the religious right, and even most religious right leaders would hopefully regard him as a nutcase. The trouble is some of his ideas and language trickles down to other religious right leaders.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rousas\\_John\\_Rushdoony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rousas_John_Rushdoony)

Okay, that is thankfully not Alberta. Regarding Bill 44, however, some of the most important questions remain unanswered:

Who in the caucus actually presented the parental rights section? Ted Morton has stated that it was someone else, but that he supports it. Does anyone in caucus understand the parental rights movement in the US? It is difficult to believe that Morton is unaware of it, given his attendance of the World Congress mentioned in this article, but it can’t be stated with certainty.

What religious leaders did this unnamed MLA discuss this with? When? Lindsay Blackett, answering a question in the legislature, listed members of “one such group” he met with “a little over a year ago”, but given the timeline of events surrounding the evolution of Bill 44, it seems unlikely that this meeting was focused on parental rights, or even that Blackett had anything to do with it.

Why are such important decisions, which concern all Albertans, being made in secret behind closed doors? Why should unnamed, unelected pastors, working for US based churches that don’t even pay taxes, have such a great influence on determining our future, while the government seems to have no interest in even listening to Alberta parents, teachers, students, school boards and human rights groups?

Democracy?

## A few links for further reading

- Parental rights:
  - <http://wnla.tripod.com/id67.html>
  - [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1374/is\\_n5\\_v56/ai\\_18640610/?tag=content;col1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1374/is_n5_v56/ai_18640610/?tag=content;col1)
  - [http://webpages.maine207.org/south/departments/lrc/parental\\_rights\\_cqreport.pdf](http://webpages.maine207.org/south/departments/lrc/parental_rights_cqreport.pdf)
- DeVos (Amway) connection to parental rights:
  - [http://www.talk2action.org/story/2006/10/16/215822/59/Front\\_Page/Dick\\_DeVos\\_Puts\\_His\\_Money\\_Where\\_His\\_Mouth\\_Isn\\_t](http://www.talk2action.org/story/2006/10/16/215822/59/Front_Page/Dick_DeVos_Puts_His_Money_Where_His_Mouth_Isn_t)
- TalkToAction on parental rights:
  - [http://www.talk2action.org/story/2009/2/10/105818/073/Front\\_Page/Parental\\_Rights\\_Constitutional\\_Wrongs\\_Religious\\_Right\\_Pushes\\_New\\_Constitutional\\_Amendment](http://www.talk2action.org/story/2009/2/10/105818/073/Front_Page/Parental_Rights_Constitutional_Wrongs_Religious_Right_Pushes_New_Constitutional_Amendment)
- Daily Kos on James Dobson, child abuse
  - <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2006/9/21/184017/640>
- Focus on the Family Canada:
  - [http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/tfn/education/articles/School\\_Choice.htm](http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/tfn/education/articles/School_Choice.htm)
  - [http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/tfn/education/articles/Make\\_a\\_Change.htm](http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/tfn/education/articles/Make_a_Change.htm)
  - [http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/tfn/education/articles/Lesson\\_for\\_Parents.htm](http://www.focusonthefamily.ca/tfn/education/articles/Lesson_for_Parents.htm)
- Christian Schools International curriculum:
  - <https://store.csionline.org/>
  - <http://www.csionline.org/>
- Canadian Christian Schools
  - <http://www.christianschools.ca/related.htm>
- Religious right alert, keeps tabs on religious right in Canada
  - <http://www.religiousrightalert.ca/the-religious-right-in-canada/>