

THE Daily Telegraph

Thin end of a religious wedge

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THE school chaplains scheme is shaping up to be a \$90 million addition to taxpayer funding of private schools. It is also paving the way for extraordinary government intervention into the appointment of religious representatives.

The program is a pinch from similar operations in Queensland and South Australia, and has the backing of Federal Labor. And it has the strong support of independent schools – that is, schools not operated by state governments.

These institutions are well placed to take up the offer of a \$20,000 subsidy for an in-house spiritual advisor and guide.

And why wouldn't they? It is in effect the sponsorship of another staff member for a school founded on religious motivations. When the Government offers \$90 million over three years, it would be foolish to wait to be asked twice. Some 85 per cent of independent schools are religion-based – roughly 780 around Australia.

They have a conformity, a homogeneity within their communities. You know what religions dominate the 125,000 students at Anglican schools, the 50,000 in Catholic schools, the 200 at the Ananda Marga institutions, and the 50 at the lone Hare Krishna independent school.

There is no mix of faiths or sects to complicate matters. One chaplain fits all.

That can't be said for state schools which educate most of our youngsters, and for which \$20,000 would go nicely towards such earthly desires as literacy, sports or air conditioning.

At these schools, particularly in cities, there often is a mix of religions, just as there is a variety of racial backgrounds among staff and pupils.

Ultimately, the decision on who preaches what and to whom will be made by the Federal Government, which is a dangerous position for any government to take.

The idea is that the Government could intervene should a school appoint a chaplain considered unacceptable to – well – the Federal Government.

In theory, there might be a Pentacostal minister who gets up the Government's nose and Education Minister Julie Bishop would have the power to withdraw the \$20,000 subsidy for this position.

It would not be surprising if the Pentacostal Church got a bit upset by this, and for other denominations and faiths to be apprehensive that they might be next.

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