

- 6 Footnote 12 of Marion Kohler and Michelle van der Merwe, *Long-run Trends in Housing Price Growth*, RBA Bulletin September Quarter (2015).
- 7 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2016*, Table 3.2.

## Moral Panic 101: Equality, Acceptance and the Safe Schools Scandal

By Benjamin Law

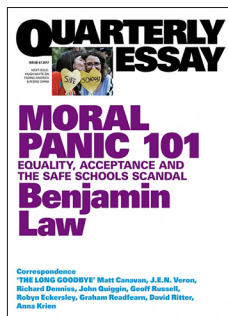
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### Reviewed by Peter Kurti

The Safe Schools program has become one of the most polarising political issues of the day. Conceived in a time of Canberra turmoil, Safe Schools Coalition Australia—the first national program to support LGBTIQ school students—was launched under the Abbott government in June 2014, but the initiative had been formulated the previous year in the dying days of the Rudd-Gillard-Rudd era.

Finance minister Penny Wong and education minister Bill Shorten were among those who were determined to ensure that any Coalition government led by Tony Abbott would have no choice but to deliver a national program across participating schools along the lines of a smaller program already run successfully in Victoria.

And although education is a state responsibility, Safe Schools is a federal program intended to be rolled out across the nation in a bid to make schools a ‘safe’ environment for pupils. What makes it such a contentious issue is that many suspect the word ‘safe’ functions not so much as an adjective as ideological tinder.

In his recent *Quarterly Essay*, Benjamin Law, a young Asian-Australian gay man, traces the history of Safe Schools and argues that the ‘scandal’ of the title was simply a confection cooked up by News Corp journalists—Law tells us he also wrote for News Corp for six years—in a bid to reclaim readers in an ailing market. Miranda Devine, Rebecca Urban and Piers Ackerman get a special broiling by Law, who seems

to feel that Safe Schools was, essentially, sabotaged by the dastardly Murdoch newspapers.

While it is true that Safe Schools has been severely criticised by News Corp, Law seems to have forgotten that he has, arrayed on his side of the argument, the ABC, Fairfax and *The Guardian*—who all promote the program with vigour and enthusiasm. Even so, Law does everyone a service by recounting here the history of Safe Schools, and by tracing just how it hit roiling political waters around 2014.

‘Homophobia is deep in the marrow of this country’, says Law towards the end of his essay. But he recognises that change is upon us with what he calls ‘one of the most radical changes in social attitudes towards queers in a single generation’. Law is a young man but even he looks at today’s LGBTIQ (you should know what those letters stand for by now) teenagers and feels sad that the more open acceptance they enjoy was not available to him when growing up.

We can be hopeful—and thankful—that the dreadful, and disgraceful, days of ‘poofster-bashing’ described by Law are finally behind us. Being openly gay today will be no bar to a person attaining the highest positions in commerce and industry, the law, politics, the academy or the defence force. Even those who don’t understand homosexuality no longer seem to mind as much, as more and more people become aware of gay and lesbian friends and family members.

Yet school students who are uncertain about their sexuality, or even their gender, or who feel ready to make more confident statements about their identity, can leave teachers and principals baffled as to how best to handle the issue. Safe Schools was developed as a resource to equip schools both with information and with suggested strategies for dealing with students sensitively. The objective was to build school environments that were ‘safe and supportive and inclusive’. So what went wrong?

There were two main problems that confronted Safe Schools. The first was the publication of *All of Us*, a component of the electronic resources available to schools containing materials, and links to other materials, that appeared to be more concerned with advocacy and activism than support. Journalists—yes, from News Corp—got hold of it and thought the rest of us should know. Law records one insider’s view that *All of Us* represented ‘the worst political decision Safe Schools ever made’.

The second problem confronting Safe Schools was the person who became its most public face: Roz Ward. A hard left lesbian activist who came to Australia in 2004, Ward soon became involved with the Victorian Safe Schools program that began under the Brumby Labor government and was continued, and funded, by the succeeding Coalition government headed by Ted Baillieu.

But Ward's activism got the better of her and she soon became known for having advocated Marxist theories of social change and—even worse—for having pitched Safe Schools as part of such social change: toleration means liberation, and liberation means class struggle. No wonder *The Australian* considered this front page news. And no wonder politicians got nervous. Publicly, Roz Ward was at best an irritant for Safe Schools, and at worst, a disaster.

Yet one principal of an independent school told me recently about another side of Ward. While conceding that Ward did, indeed, have a dreadful public profile, the principal described how Ward had visited the school to work with a student, parents and teachers. The principal could not speak highly enough of her work there. Indeed, many principals who have signed up to the program simply see Safe Schools as one resource among many for helping to forge the virtues of tolerance, acceptance and respect in school communities.

Law handles all this evenly—far more so than one would expect, given his recent highly-publicised and offensively lurid social media outbursts. But he might have taken time to consider why the Safe Schools program continues to generate concern in some quarters. 'Safety' has become an important cultural metaphor for our time. It draws strength from our prevailing—and, at times, overwhelming—fear of harm which lurks, we are told repeatedly, everywhere. And so safety has become an end in itself. Questioning is out: we must affirm identity, shun judgement, rebuke intolerance. No wonder the pursuit of 'safety' can sound, at times, more like an ideological campaign.

It's easy to lay all the blame at the feet of those nasty hacks at News Corp, but if there was a 'scandal' about Safe Schools, it was generated, in part, by those who designed, promoted and helped deliver it to students. And if there was a 'Moral Panic 101', it was, in part, caused by parents who got wind of the program and

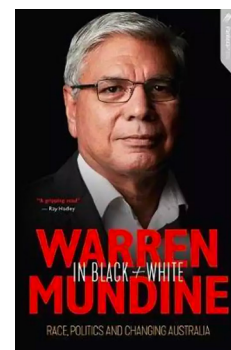
became fearful, whether justifiably or not, that ideas about sex, sexuality and gender were being put into the minds of the very young.

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**Warren Mundine in Black and White: Race, Politics and Changing Australia**  
By Nyunggai Warren Mundine

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**Reviewed by Sara Hudson**

At the end of this deeply personal and moving memoir of his life, Warren tells a group of young men in Alice Springs a story about a young Aboriginal boy (p.472). The boy was from a good hardworking family, but during his teenage years he had started to become disillusioned with school, getting into fights and drinking alcohol. As a result, he ended up in court on criminal charges.

Now this boy could have gone the way of many young, troubled men—into a life of petty crime, cycling in out of prison, and feeling angry at the world. However, luckily for the boy, he had the support of his family and community who spoke up for him in court and provided him with the encouragement he needed to turn his life around. Instead of becoming yet another criminal justice statistic, the boy got a job, completed his schooling and eventually became the National President of the Australian Labor Party and the chairperson of the Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council. This young boy was, of course, Warren.

In many ways, Warren's story exemplifies all that classical liberalism stands for, such as the power of