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Education and Social Justice: The Absent
Kevin Rudd

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Abstract

In October and November last year, Kevin Rudd outlined his Christian social democratic principles. His essays for *The Monthly* were in many ways refreshing. They revealed a commitment to issues of social justice that hitherto had been buried by his passion for the minutiae of foreign policy. “Social-democratic values are a check on rampant individualism”, Rudd declared boldly. Yet if we look at Rudd’s political agenda pointed to in the first essay, a clear missing dimension becomes apparent. The environment, global poverty and asylum seekers receive pride of place and when the list grows we get “rising interest rates, declining housing affordability, slowing productive growth, an Americanised industrial-relations system, a regressive consumption tax, the skyrocketing costs of university education and the steady undermining of universal health insurance”. Why no mention of the steady undermining of universal public education? Has this not been at heart of the Liberal’s attack on the public sphere in Australia? Does Rudd’s religious commitment blind him to the ethical issues evoked by policies that favour systematically private education? Is this the same Rudd who refers to “the privatised, pietised and politically compliant Christianity on offer from the televangelists of the twentieth century?” How, pray tell, is his position on schooling any different from theirs? Perhaps this was just a silence in the first essay and the second would disclose a commitment to roll back the privatisation of schooling in Australia.

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Anthony Ashbolt

In October and November last year, Kevin Rudd outlined his Christian social democratic principles. His essays for *The Monthly* were in many ways refreshing. They revealed a commitment to issues of social justice that hitherto had been buried by his passion for the minutiae of foreign policy. “Social-democratic values are a check on rampant individualism”, Rudd declared boldly. Yet if we look at Rudd’s political agenda pointed to in the first essay, a clear missing dimension becomes apparent. The environment, global poverty and asylum seekers receive pride of place and when the list grows we get “rising interest rates, declining housing affordability, slowing productive growth, an Americanised industrial-relations system, a regressive consumption tax, the skyrocketing costs of university education and the steady undermining of universal health insurance”.

Why no mention of the steady undermining of universal public education? Has this not been at heart of the Liberal’s attack on the public sphere in Australia? Does Rudd’s religious commitment blind him to the ethical issues evoked by policies that favour systematically private education? Is this the same Rudd who refers to “the privatised, pietised and politically compliant Christianity on offer from the televangelists of the twentieth century?” How, pray tell, is his position on schooling any different from theirs? Perhaps this was just a silence in the first essay and the second would disclose a commitment to roll back the privatisation of schooling in Australia.

Rudd’s guns blazed against neo-liberal doctrinal principles in the second essay entitled “Howard’s Brutopia”. Howard, he fulminated at one stage, was “desperate not to have” a debate about the clash between “market fundamentalism and fairness”. Here was a perfect opportunity for him to specify principles of fairness in schooling. Instead, however, he operated on a level of generality informed by David McKnight’s analysis in *Beyond Right and Left*. Yet where McKnight pinpointed (but did

not detail) the privatisation of schooling as a key element of neo-liberal policy, Rudd chose to ignore this. Education only receives a mention in general terms, as one of those things the state can support as a “public good”. He did not then take the opportunity to discuss the critical role that public institutions, such as government schools, have in fostering the public good. Long on rhetoric, he was short on policy commitments.

Such relinquishing of principles is evidenced most strongly in Blair’s New Labour where the mantra of choice has disguised the rapid erosion of secularism. And not-so-new and not-so-labour Labor in Australia trots out this mantra. Thus Rudd’s affirmation earlier this year that the Government/non-Government school divide is a thing of the past. He wishes it away with a wave of his rhetorical wand and, presto!, all schools are the same. To use the language of Stephen Smith, shadow minister for Education, it does not matter what label is on the archway because what really matters is the quality of education. There probably aren’t many public schools with archways but that does not concern Smith or Labor. They know the postmodern hymn and they sing it loudly: “It doesn’t matter if you’re public or private”. Only it does, of course. It matters, by any measurement of social justice, that funds are being diverted systematically to schools that parade their private status while genuinely public schools are left to languish. This, indeed, is a shameful aspect of contemporary public policy. Kevin Rudd declared in *The Monthly* his beliefs in “the progressive values of equity, community and sustainability”. Yet he undermined that with an initial silence about public education and then a deafening roar reinforcing the very privatised values he claimed to expose.

Rudd now repeats the Beazley doctrine that no school will have its funding reduced. Yet even if we were to accept the current funding model as equitable (and it clearly is not), it is betrayed consistently more than it is honoured. Private schools are flooded with funds that some of them would be denied under a properly implemented SES scheme. It seems, however, that Rudd Labor does not even believe in applying any formula. Its espousal of an abstract “needs-based” system promises more of what is. This actually displays a certain contempt for ordinary people, which is only partly camouflaged by a neo-liberal decoding of middle class desires. Just keep the money rolling towards private schools and that will keep the middle class happy. Forget about the almost 70% who retain faith in the public system. Transfer the wealth of the nation instead to the faith-based schools that have proliferated as a consequence

of the Liberal's ditching of Labor's New Schools Policy. And keep transferring it also to the very wealthy private schools that were to, under Latham's policy, have their relative funding cut - over time - such that a third water polo pool might have stretched the budget somewhat. No school would have had its funding cut in absolute terms under the Latham policy. Such is its misrepresentation, however, that Labor itself now portrays it as encouraging class warfare in the streets.

Labor's schooling revolution involves a resource sharing plan that does not even begin to address questions of social equity and equal access. Differences between the public and private systems, differences exacerbated by the funding policies of the Howard Government, are simply ignored. An imaginary unity is conjured up and a philosophy of sharing arises miraculously from the neo-liberal graveyard. Cooperation not competition is to be the guiding beacon. The noble sentiment shields years of private school boosting and public school neglect. Labor cannot even bring itself to acknowledge this. What Rudd said about the Liberals being desperate to avoid a debate about fairness and market fundamentalism must also be applied to brand Labor. To paraphrase Theodor Adorno, the major political parties these days are not also commodities, they are commodities through and through. The logic of the market pervades their thinking, even if one brand waves a banner of cooperation and sharing to disguise the further degradation of universal public education.

If Rudd had the courage of his convictions, the Christian principles he pretends to enunciate would be placed at the centre of a policy strengthening the public education system. Yet when it comes to social justice in education, the religious lobby seems to "exit stage right". One does not doubt the professed commitment to social justice advertised on the web sites of certain Catholic schools. Except for one thing—social justice stops at their door. The token refugees and Aborigines can be produced for publicity. The doctrine of exclusion remains firmly in place.

Until Labor commits itself again, through proper funding policies, to the values and practice of universal public education, it cannot bleat about social justice. And until Kevin Rudd stops capitulating to the private school lobby, his fine words about the evils of neo-liberalism will remain as perfect examples of rhetoric stripped of a coherent public policy component.