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# Public Education in the Universe of Closed Discourse

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## education | Anthony Ashbolt

### Public Education in the Universe of Closed Discourse

IN HIS CLASSIC ANALYSIS of consumer capitalist society, *One Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse pinpointed the crucial role of language in fashioning conformist thinking. A one-dimensional framework of thought prevailed and alternative ways of thinking were cast out, characterised as propaganda or absorbed into the dominant discourse and thus suitably domesticated:

The unification of opposites which characterises the commercial and political style is one of the many ways in which discourse and communication make themselves immune against the expression of protest and refusal . . . In exhibiting its contradictions as the token of its truth, this universe of discourse closes itself against any other discourse which is not on its terms. And, by its capacity to assimilate all other terms to its own, it offers the prospect of combining the greatest possible tolerance with the greatest possible unity. Nevertheless its language testifies to the repressive character of this unity. This language speaks in constructions which impose upon the recipient the slanted and abridged meaning, the blocked development of content, the acceptance of that which is offered in the form in which it is offered.<sup>1</sup>

There is, to put it in more recent terms, no alternative. As the choices diminish under an ideological cloak proclaiming an abundance of choices, even oppositional forces begin to work within the closed universe of discourse. Thus the education debate in contemporary Australia is dominated by certain assumptions and mythologies. One of these is that the public/private distinction is no longer worth making in any absolute sense.

The Howard Government has increased the proportion of federal funds going to the private system from 58 per cent in 1996 to 67 per cent in 2004. Small faith-based schools have proliferated as a consequence of the abandonment of Labor's New Schools Policy. This prohibited the government funding of a new private school established in an area serviced adequately by the local public school. Public funding of private schools has risen so dramatically in the past two decades that the majority of private schools are only private in a narrow sense. The problem is that this narrow sense has abundant meaning. These schools are still private and this needs to be stated loudly and clearly, again and again. The notion that the public/private distinction in schooling should be discarded, as with other mythologies in the schooling debate,<sup>2</sup> has an ideological purpose – to mystify the essence of a policy that benefits private schools. The unification of public and private, to use Marcuse's formulation, immunises the system against critique because it is then all one happy system. Yet as Marcuse recognised, the language used represses real meaning and sets its own terms of debate. To properly transcend these terms is to work outside of them.

A Fabian Society flier advertising an education debate signals the degree to which accommodationist jargon has been absorbed by erstwhile supporters of the public sphere. The logical non sequitur almost conceals the capitulation: "Private schools [sic] share of federal money increases with few strings attached. Perhaps its [sic] time to move beyond the public/private confrontation and consider what works across systems."<sup>3</sup> We are encouraged frequently to move beyond stale debates or to leave behind old baggage. This was the sort of language used by Bush and Howard (or their PR men) when WMD were not discovered in Iraq. Conveniently, they had 'moved on' from this uncomfortable fact. Far from embracing a newly invigorated form of political thought, 'moving on' or 'beyond' now tends to constitute political amnesia in the service of ruling-class interests.

The divide in schooling is real. It does reflect other social divisions. No amount of conjuring up dreamworlds beyond public and private can eliminate this fact, and language plays a pivotal role in preparing the desiccation of the public sphere. Thus state aid to private schools has been depicted as a unifying policy, one that cut through the sectarian divide. The gradual erosion of public education and reinforcing of class divisions is thereby obscured. The 'unity' established by state aid was fundamentally repressive and that issue can ill afford to be seen as over, in the past, resolved long ago. To do so accepts the terms of debate now firmly set by the private-school lobby. Helen Palmer, in warning of the threat to secular schooling over forty years ago, put it well:

The Founding Fathers did not create a secular education system because they thought religion was a Bad Thing. They did so because they thought it was a matter for the individual. And they believed in the value of a really national education system, with no discrimination at all, in building the Australian community.<sup>4</sup>

Thus we can say, along with Raewyn Connell, that “public education expresses the idea of democracy in education”.<sup>5</sup>

These days we are told that choice embodies our desire for democratic governance. Yet choice is not, in the end, about the public good but about private opportunities that invariably assist the more affluent sections of the community. As the authors of a meticulous study of schooling in England put it: “On the whole, parental desire for choice is a response to inequitable provision. But choice, however regulated, is not the *solution* to inequity . . . As far as equity is concerned, choice is a dangerous irrelevance.”<sup>6</sup> It needs to be added, however, that this ‘irrelevance’ is a powerful signifier and difficult to challenge. How can anyone be against choice?

Leftist critic Boris Frankel has outlined the choices faced by affluent parents “committed to public education”.<sup>7</sup> First, they can maintain ideological purity “and let their children be sacrificed in under-resourced government schools”. How neat – the options are removed by the emotive term “sacrificed”. Would any parent choose to sacrifice their children? Frankel here (and this is true of certain sections of the so-called Left in Australia, particularly the academic Left) accepts the terms of debate established by the Right – the choice, for those sufficiently affluent to have a choice, is that you have no choice. Choice thus tantalises only to disappear.

Frankel’s second choice is, “try to get them away from problem-ridden schools and into the few selective entry government schools”. Choice is once more removed by language manipulation. Why is it that private schools are never “problem-ridden”, even when spectacular examples, like the abuse at Sydney’s Trinity College, get significant publicity?<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, parents can “campaign for change” but such campaigning “will often mean complete loss of hope”. Here again Frankel accepts all the terms of debate laid down by neoliberalism. He is not the only leftist to be seduced by the ideology of choice. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, together with Harry Brighouse, have tried valiantly to give the ideology a leftist sheen.<sup>9</sup> Sadly, however, it still looks as murky as it ever did.

A tremendous thing this choice – it really is a commodity with endless possibilities, including its self-negation. Stephen Ball has pointed to the many studies highlighting the negative consequences of choice in education, especially the almost ineluctable tendency towards a two-tier system.<sup>10</sup> Choice cannot be separated from its social and economic context, from the very fact that some people have many more choices than others. As Ball argues, “Education markets are organised and animated by inequality, exclusivity and exclusion”.<sup>11</sup> The ideology of choice in education is linked explicitly to the objectives of privatisation and deregulation. The elevation of this ideology is dependent upon a devaluing of the term ‘public’.<sup>12</sup> Choice then means succumbing to the ways of the market or being swept aside. The very thing being advocated – choice – is thereby removed from the agenda. Ultimately, we have no choice about corporate globalisation and so, too, no choice about getting the government out of the market (except for the many subsidies to the market) and, in the end, perhaps, no choice about whether to send our children to public or private schools because, while we were dozing in the dreamland of democracy, all schools became private. An absurd scenario? If someone in the 1960s or even the 1970s had suggested there would come a time when federal government funding of private schools would outstrip that of public universities, they would have been treated with scorn. The common sense of our society has shifted dramatically in little more than twenty years and who knows what another ten years of market mentality might bring?

A booklet published a decade ago by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) declares its direction dramatically: *A Private Education For All*. Not too long ago, this sort of pious pontificating might have been regarded as satire. Tragically, such ineffable silliness is rapidly becoming public policy. Its author, Mark Harrison, made clear his objections to public education at the outset:

The political process is a bad way to run education. In practice public education is extremely wasteful and does not give value for money. Further, it performs poorly at meeting broad social objectives, such as redistributing income to the poor and equalising opportunities. In sum, it is both inefficient and inequitable.<sup>13</sup>

His solution was to turn to the market – as everyone knows, it always gives value for money, is never wasteful or inefficient and is remarkably successful at achieving social equity. This is what I call ‘trickle down education theory’. If you make all schooling private (there’s that infinite range of choices again), the privileged few will, almost miraculously, become the privileged all. Just as trickle down in economic theory became trickle up in practice, so, too, such an educational policy would rigidify class distinctions. You cannot destroy public education without also destroying ideals of social equality central to our national character (as well as our national mythology). This would not have needed stating twenty or thirty

years ago. The fact that it does now testifies to the ideological power of marketeers who cloak their cynical push for special privileges under words like choice, equity and reform.

The current government funding model for private schools (itself now subject to a closed government enquiry) was introduced in the 1999 Budget, which saw private-school funding boosted considerably and the basis of that funding changed somewhat to take apparent account of socio-economic status (the SES model). Underpinning the new policy was the rhetoric of choice, now joined in true Orwellian fashion to the rhetoric of *equity*.<sup>14</sup> The brilliance was this – you take an inherently inequitable policy and clothe it in the language of equity. So, the Minister for Education at the time, Dr Kemp, said that the new policy would enhance the opportunities of school choice for low-income earners.<sup>15</sup> In reality, of course, the SES model has given the greatest boost to wealthy private schools and they have hardly been invaded by working-class students.<sup>16</sup> Trinity Grammar received \$1,482,489 in government funding in 2000 but that rose to \$5,318,8894 in 2004. Theoretically, of course, the SES model should ensure that some schools, at least, get reduced funding. It is predicated, however, on the principle that no school will get less funding; a fascinating principle and one embraced happily by the post-Latham Labor Party. What this means in practice is that very wealthy schools like Ascham and Cranbrook continue to receive in excess of their entitlements under the SES model.<sup>17</sup> So even a flawed system of funding has its own built-in regressive trigger, one disguised by a feel-good ‘none will be worse off’ mantra.

With regard to 1999 education funding decisions, Kemp and the Government had another agenda, one not mentioned in the publicity surrounding the Budget. And it involved *reform*. There was always something surreal about people like Peter Reith and David Kemp using the word reform, something which hinted of darker, more sinister, images. The boost in private funding, argued Kemp, would push public schools towards reform. And what was it, pray tell, which needed reforming? According to Kemp, the increased funding to private schools would compel State Ministers of Education to “push ahead with the reform process and stop being intimidated by unions”.<sup>18</sup> Teachers’ Unions, so the argument goes, were and are being unnecessarily protective of a public sphere that is withering away. Reform, in this context, actually means partial privatisation – you begin with a devolution of authority (dressing up the process in the language of participatory democracy) and end up (but they do not tell you this) with no public schools. *A private education for all*, achieved by the ingenious technique of camouflaging the political intent of privatisation behind the language of democratic access and control.

In 2002, at a Liberal Party conference, Malcolm Turnbull launched a paper on education by Brian Caldwell and John Roskam. Published by the Menzies Research Centre, the paper advocated ending any distinction in school funding between public and private schools, tax concessions for parents who choose private schooling and parental control of government schools.<sup>19</sup> Turnbull, a passionate advocate of a republic for merchant bankers, picked up this agenda and also paraded his belief in choice: “The Howard Government has done more to promote parents’ right to choose than any Australian government since Robert Menzies first provided state aid to the Catholic school system”.<sup>20</sup> When Turnbull pinpointed current supposedly inequitable subsidising of the rich, an agenda became apparent: “But why”, he noted, “should a millionaire’s son receive a free education at Vaucluse High School when a battling single mum has to pay fees to the local non-government school to educate her daughter?” This peculiar analogy reveals much about its author’s understanding of the taxation system in Australia. A millionaire should be paying a substantial amount of tax to support, amongst other things, free education. The fact that many evade such responsibility is due, in part, to the wily footwork of people like Turnbull. Moreover, why the assumption that the battling single mum has to send her daughter to a non-government school? Because, of course, she has the choice and the mass media have told her that the local public school does not really figure in her range of choices.

Battling single mother and Associate Professor Joanna Mendelssohn defends vigorously her decision to “go private”. While waxing lyrical about private education, she decries the decline in public education standards, though produces little evidence to support her assertions.<sup>21</sup> It is a given and that is that. Public schooling is inflexible and essentially authoritarian, whereas “Private schools can run to their own rules”.<sup>22</sup> Funding is only grudgingly acknowledged as an issue: “While some of the growth of the private system can be sheeted home to the support it now receives from government funding, from my observation it is management practices rather than lush green sporting fields that are the basis of its success”.<sup>23</sup> The sporting fields and other lavish accoutrements presumably do no harm but it is managerial skill, combined with teaching excellence, which has triumphed. One can almost hear her saying: ‘Just place the private school personnel in a disadvantaged school and see what miracles can be worked!’ Well, put that way, even she might concede that the buildings and grounds do help after all. Mendelssohn’s ideal private school world is, in the end, dependent upon filthy lucre. After all, even Independent schools where

tuition fees exceed the average resource expenditure for government school students (and that accounts for over one quarter of private schools) receive generous state and federal government assistance – in 2004, \$2492 per primary student and \$3494 per secondary student.<sup>24</sup> This is a funding anomaly that exposes Mendelssohn's claptrap about the relative insignificance of material resources.

The language used by Mendelssohn in defending her decision to move private is telling:

When Lucy, my eldest daughter, was in year 11 at her private school, she was taught maths by a new graduate, a young woman of exceptional brilliance who had a first-class honours degree and a mind that did not stop. The school had scooped her up with an offer that the creaking state system could not match. It was not money but influence that was the key to the seduction.<sup>25</sup>

It never is money, of course. Private schooling has nothing whatsoever to do with the sustenance of wealth and privilege. It is always about fulfilling the needs of your children. Mendelssohn's class position becomes clear:

Meanwhile, those of us who took our children out of the state system to ensure that they had a future, have to keep on reminding our friends that our children should not be required as sacrifices in an ideological battle.<sup>26</sup>

Mendelssohn's children have, in actuality, already been sacrificed in an ideological battle, although such sacrifice is always camouflaged by the 'you've got to do the best thing for your kids' mantra. She shows not the slightest concern for other children yet pretends to be politically progressive. Thus in the on-line *New Matilda*, she parades her class prejudices as if they are anti-authoritarian principles, decrying an editorial in the *Australian* for its attack on the teaching of Shakespeare at Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School (SCEGGS) Darlinghurst.<sup>27</sup> To her, this is reminiscent of Howard's intimidation of state schools. This time, however, and here her chest heaves with private-school pride, the poor saps from Murdoch's stable have not realised who they are dealing with:

In attacking SCEGGS the neocons may have bitten off more than they can chew. It is not a state school. It cannot be bullied into flying flags of convenient patriotism for jingoistic prime ministers. One of the advantages of elite private schools is that the fees parents pay gives the school the freedom to pursue excellence in the face of political bullying.

Another advantage is that they help reproduce the ruling class but Mendelssohn is far more interested in their supposed subversive function. This, of course, would be laughable if it was not nauseating. Mendelssohn's own dreamworld is so hermetically sealed she does not realise private schools are subject to Howard's flag-waving edict. Still, come the Revolution we must remember to have the phone number of SCEGGS Darlinghurst handy!

Recently the former payroll clerk of the exclusive Sydney Grammar School SCEGGS (formerly SCEGGS) Redlands admitted to her lawyers that she had stolen \$500,000 from the school during five years of her ten-year tenure.<sup>28</sup> The Chairman of the school's board was unfazed: "It was a case of small amounts of money going missing over a long period of time . . . so it was not so noticeable". A drop in the bucket, you might say, given the school has an annual budget of \$30 million. "If you can imagine a pipe underground with a slow leak . . . we may never have found it." Ask any public school head if such lack of accountability would be allowed in their school. Of course not but SCEGGS Redlands gets generous government assistance, with combined state and federal funding in 2002–2003 being close to three million dollars.<sup>29</sup> The fact that such a wealthy school, where fees range from \$12–18,000, gets any government aid is scandalous. Yet the problem with state aid does not start and stop in relation to very wealthy private schools. A private school cannot, by definition, be 'needy' in terms of public grants. Here again, language is crucial.

When social democrats defend the funding of 'needy' private schools they accept the terms of the debate. More importantly, perhaps, all private schools become needy and it is thus impossible, or at least very difficult, to distinguish between different needs. It is the Left's task to re-cast the debate and establish alternatives. This means setting aside the very notion of a needy private school. Funnily enough, even economic rationalism can be on the side of those who are critical of state aid to private schools. In 2006, a New South Wales State Government audit raised questions about public transport subsidies to school children.<sup>30</sup> The Schools Student Transport Scheme costs \$500 million a year, of which around \$400 million is spent on private-school children who sometimes travel very long distances to their parents' school of choice (which, aside from the question of equity, raises significant environmental issues). Is it

unreasonable to suggest, along with the NSW Teachers Federation, that this choice should preclude publicly subsidised transport? And perhaps, as the Federation also suggested, the NSW Government might think of scrapping giving \$600 million in per-capita grants to private schools.<sup>31</sup> The amount of savings government could make if subsidies to the private schools were removed is immense, yet we are always told how private schools lift the burden of education funding off government. Nothing could be further from the truth, as these ‘needy’ schools we hear about receive the vast majority of their funding from the state, to the point where many do not even need to charge fees.

The drift towards privatisation generally, and private education specifically, appears at times inexorable. The social-democratic Left, consciously or unconsciously, feeds this drift by acquiescing in what Marcuse termed “the closing of the universe of discourse”.<sup>32</sup> We need, instead, to expose the fallacies underpinning the ideology of choice, the essential vacuity of a free-market concept of equity and the sinister design behind certain policies of reform. If we can inject meaning back into debates about education, that have been characterised by an acceptance of corrupted terminology, then perhaps we can begin to propel a necessary shift in government thinking. Public education remains central to any vision of a fair and just Australia. It must again become central to actual policy.

1. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (1964), Abacus, London, 1972, pp.82–83.
2. On mythologies in the schooling debates, see Anthony Ashbolt, ‘The myths we are taught about schools’, 21 July 2006 <[www.newmatilda.com/policytoolkit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=452&CategoryID=9](http://www.newmatilda.com/policytoolkit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=452&CategoryID=9)>, and ‘Labor’s education policy buried by an untrue tale’, 28 July 2006, <[www.newmatilda.com/policytoolkit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=457&CategoryID=9](http://www.newmatilda.com/policytoolkit/policydetail.asp?PolicyID=457&CategoryID=9)>.
3. ‘What Makes a Good School? Beyond the Public/ Private Debate’, Fabian Society flier for education debate on 16 August, 2006, <[open.newmatilda.com/node/239](http://open.newmatilda.com/node/239)>, accessed 17 August 2006.
4. Helen Palmer, ‘Free, Compulsory and Protestant: the vanishing secular state’ (June 1961), in Doreen Bridges (ed.), *Helen Palmer’s Outlook*, Helen Palmer Memorial Committee, Sydney, 1982, p.91.
5. Raewyn Connell, ‘The New Right Triumphant: The Privatisation Agenda and Public Education in Australia’, in George Martell (ed.), *Education’s Iron Cage and its dismantling in the new global order*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Toronto, 2006, p.160. Also see Alan Reid, ‘Rethinking the Democratic Purposes of Public Schooling in a Globalizing World’, in Michael W. Apple, Jane Kenway & Michael Singh (eds), *Globalizing Education: Policies, Pedagogies, & Politics*, Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2005, pp.281–296. Unfortunately, Reid’s proposals for reforming state aid by making private schools more publicly accountable and less exclusionary are fundamentally unworkable. Private schools in Australia exclude – that, indeed, is their *raison d’être*.
6. Sharon Gewirtz, Stephen J. Ball & Richard Bowe, *Markets, Choice and Equity in Education*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1995, p.190.
7. Boris Frankel, *Zombies, Lilliputians & Sadists: The Power of the Living Dead and the Future of Australia*, Curtin University Press, Fremantle, 2004, p.167
8. In 2001, three former boarders at Trinity plead guilty to aggravated indecent assault against two other boarders. They thus avoided twelve more serious charges brought by the Crown. The case exposed a culture of bastardry at Trinity, one which possibly was and is shared by some other elite private schools.
9. Samuel Bowles & Herbert Gintis, ‘Efficient redistribution: New Rules for Markets, States and Communities’, in Erik Olin Wright (ed.), *Recasting Egalitarianism: New Rules for Communities, States and Markets*, Verso, London, 1998, pp.41–44; and Harry Brighouse’s essay in the same volume, ‘School Choice: Theoretical Considerations’, pp.141–180; Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice*, OUP, Oxford, 2000.
10. Stephen J. Ball, ‘Markets, Equity and Values in Education’, in Richard Pring & Geoffrey Walford (eds), *Affirming the Comprehensive Ideal*, The Falmer Press, London, 1997, pp.72–73.
11. *Ibid.*, p.72.
12. Jeffrey R. Henig, *Rethinking School Choice: The Limits of the Metaphor*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p.95.
13. Mark Harrison, *A Private Education for All*, CIS Occasional Papers 56, The Centre for Independent Studies, 1996, p.1. Harrison, equipped with an economics doctorate from Chicago, unsurprisingly, has subsequently resurfaced in New Zealand, where he is pushing his neoliberal barrow for Education Forum, a group linked with the New Zealand Business Roundtable: see, for example, Mark Harrison, *Education Matters: Governments, Markets and New Zealand Schools*, Education Forum, Wellington, 2004.
14. David Kemp, *Choice and Equity: Funding Arrangements for Non-Government Schools 2001–2004*, May 1999.
15. Kemp, p.2; Stephanie Rathael, ‘Huge Boost for Private Schools’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 1999.
16. ‘The SES Model – Biggest Increases to the Wealthiest Schools’, AEU Federal Election 2004 Fact Sheet no.8, April 2004; ‘NSW Non-Government Schools Funding 2001–2004 An A–Z Guide’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 2000.
17. Anna Patty, ‘Windfall for rich schools as funding locked in nice age’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 May 2006.
18. Lauren Martin, ‘Kemp Pressures Public Schools’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May 1999.
19. Michelle Grattan, ‘Let parents run public schools – Libs push’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13–14 April 2002. The Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, was somewhat annoyed by the report and, in particular, rejected the notion of tax concessions on the grounds of equity. More recently, of course, Warren Mundine, the ALP President, re-introduced the argument about tax concessions. Far from condemning Mundine, senior Labor representatives remained distinctly quiet at the time, seeming to be less interested in defending ‘equity’ than Nelson had been.
20. Malcolm Turnbull, ‘Accountability the key to school funding debate’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 April 2002.
21. Joanna Mendelssohn, ‘Moving Private’, *Griffith Review* 11, 2006, pp.113–121. An edited version of this paper appeared as ‘The lesson I learnt in private’, ‘Spectrum’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4–5 February 2006.
22. Mendelssohn, ‘Moving Private’, p.121.
23. *Ibid.*, pp.120–121.
24. Louise Watson, ‘The total operating resources of Australian private schools in 2004’, Lifelong Learning, Manning Clark House Inc., Canberra, 30 June 2004, p.7; <[www.manningclark.org.au/papers/LouiseWatson.html](http://www.manningclark.org.au/papers/LouiseWatson.html)>, accessed 21 August 2006.
25. Mendelssohn, ‘Moving Private’, p.121.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Joanna Mendelssohn, ‘Education: Post-Structuralism and the Modern Schoolgirl’, *New Matilda*, 26 April 2006 <[www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetail.asp?ArticleID=1519](http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetail.asp?ArticleID=1519)>.
28. Kelly Bourke, ‘Payroll Clerk admits to fraud in school scandal’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 2006. SCECGS Redlands is the Cremorne Church of England Co-educational Grammar School.

29. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 2004. Combined federal and state grants totalled \$2,741,905. Those for SCEGGS Darlinghurst totalled \$1,848,532.
30. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 February 2006.
31. *Illawarra Mercury*, 24 February 2006.
32. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, p.78.

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