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As a political system, democracy depends upon a vibrant public sphere. Democracy in liberal democratic societies is sometimes confused with doctrines upholding individual rights. Thus it is that matters of individual choice come to be perceived as inalienable democratic rights when they are nothing of the sort. Private choices and desires fit neatly into a concept of social good defined essentially by the market. They are things to be bought and sold, their value adjusted to the vicissitudes of market forces. If we begin to think of education in this way, we have begun also to sacrifice democracy at the altar of private possession, individual greed and/or religious faith.

Education is a public good and, as such, depends upon public guarantees. This does not, however, mean that the public sphere needs to support private education ventures. The public guarantees, in this context, relate mostly to public education and when applied to private education are restricted to matters of a common curriculum, and, in general, common subjection to principles of law (including, of course, anti-discrimination legislation). In terms of government funding, then, there is no obligation - according to principles of democracy - for government financial aid to private schools. Indeed, such funding raises serious questions about the values attached to education (as well as the extent to which the designation private or independent makes any sense). Why does it concern values? Because when the Australian government made the decision to fund directly private schools, it commenced the corrosion of the principles underpinning our education system, principles enunciated by Australia's founding fathers: free, compulsory and secular.

We have a Prime Minister concerned with the values promoted by public schools (yet strangely silent about the boisterous, if violent, camaraderie and good-humoured bastardisation encouraged by certain private schools). But let's be clear about this - values here serve as a camouflage, a masquerade, concealing the intent of pushing an agenda that undermines public education. Raise the flag, stamp out political correctness, re-institute discipline and authority (as if they had disappeared) - these are mantras, coded messages to parents - Private schools are better than public schools and, look, we have made it easier for you to choose a private school for your child. This sort of public policy has nothing to do with democracy and everything to do with the privatisation and deregulation of education. Make no mistake about it - this Government is advised by educational thinkers like those at the Centre for Independent Studies whose vision is that of a private education for all (the title of one of their pamphlets). Those are the values being propagated, not values associated with the ideal of education as a public good.

Sometimes this sort of private education philosophy might be expressed as support for a voucher system. Vouchers sound innocent enough, perhaps, but they have their policy origins in the work of that Godfather of free market ideology, Milton Friedman. And underpinning vouchers, of course, is the ideology of choice. The problem is this - there is a difference between democratic choice, which is based on a strong and healthy public sphere, and private choice, which revolves around institutions to some degree outside the public sphere. Put bluntly, democratic choice is connected to a strong public education system because without it, your choices in life diminish and are dependent upon the sort of private school you go to. Examine the real elites in our society, the genuine makers of public policy (including politicians), and you will find private schools represented disproportionately. The politician or senior bureaucrat may not have gone to private schools themselves but, overwhelmingly, they send their children to private schools. What sort of message does that give society? Moreover, what sort of educational policy is being made and in whose interests? Democratic choice disappears when education policy is decided, in the main, by those whose self-interest is connected to private schools.

If you choose, despite the existence of a strong public education system (one equipped to provide the best education possible)...if you choose to send your children to a private school, that is your right. You are not, in other words, obliged to send your children to the public school but you are obliged to support the public system through taxes, just as you are obliged to support public transport, public health, public leisure facilities, public environment projects and so on. You never go to a public park - does this mean there should not be a vast system of public parks supported, in part, by you? You never use public transport - does this mean there should be no public transport? Or even that your private transport should be subsidised heavily by government (which, believe it or not it might already be)? And so it goes with health and a vast array of infrastructure services we either take for granted or wrongly assume to be wholly in the private sphere. There is an immense amount of government support for private enterprise, including private schools, before we even begin to deal with direct subsidies (think of roads, electricity, and other forms of infrastructure support). The argument that your taxes going to education should be at least partly diverted to private schools does not fit into a democratic philosophy. Rather, it fits in neatly to a society that has rendered education just another free market accounting exercise.

In terms of a democratic philosophy, therefore, there should be no government funding of private schools. In terms of political realism today, at minimum the stress must be placed on public education. Then any funding which goes to private schools must be residual; that is, funding left over once the public system has been guaranteed excellence. Further advantaging of private education means automatically the erosion of our system of social justice and the steady dismantling of democracy. Democracy,

you see, cannot be privatised because, somewhere not too far along that privatisation road, it ceases to be democracy.

This is the unamended speech Wollongong University politics convenor Dr Anthony Ashbolt gave to the Public Education Supporters' Forum at Keira High School on behalf of the Illawarra Teachers Association on September 8 2004.