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Public education for our future

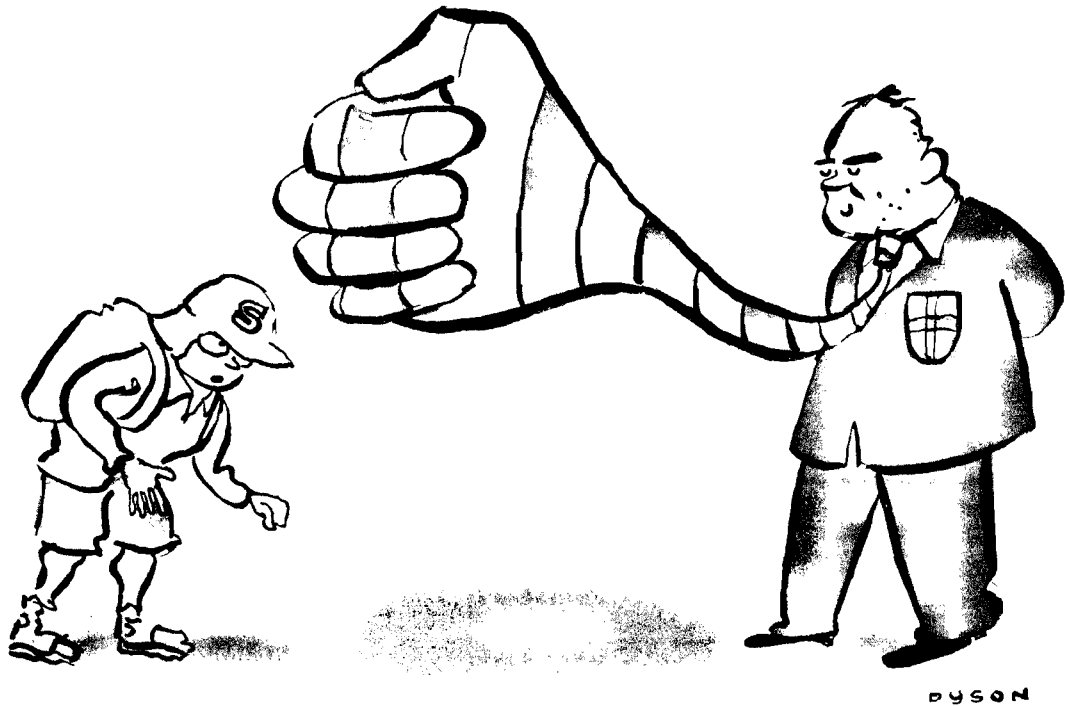
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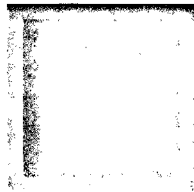
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ANTHONY ASHBOLT examines the funding inequalities in education and problems with policies of social exclusion.

Public education for our future



TWO SNAPSHOTS FROM THE 2010 federal election. The first, a polling booth at Edmund Rice College in Wollongong. The woman handing out for the Liberals says to me "These are very attractive grounds, aren't they". "Yes, indeed", I say, dreaming that one day all public schools might have such salubrious surrounds. I take a wander around the school, only to find that the playing fields and impressively landscaped gardens out the front are supplemented by an oval at the back the size of the SCG (or so it seems), surrounded by a neat white picket fence. The buildings are maintained

impeccably and, while not grand, of a much higher standard than the local public schools. Edmund Rice is not an elite Catholic school. It is a relatively low-fee Catholic school (the fee for year 12 being \$3923). Yet it takes up an inordinate amount of the lower reaches of Mt. Keira (nine hectares) and stands as just one of those symbols of what is wrong with schools funding in Australia. In 2007 it received \$1,723,050 from the state government and \$4,406, 506 from the federal government, a grand total of \$6,129,556 in public funds. Its web site notes proudly that it is 'Accessible and welcoming to all'. It

is truly wonderful (in an Orwellian fashion) that such language can be used to disguise a politics of exclusivity.

Snapshot two—one person interviewed by *The Illawarra Mercury* after casting his vote at Figtree Heights public school declares 'I think private schools receive too much funding. The Liberals were the most appealing party for me'. And another declares, after casting her vote for the Liberals: 'My major issue locally is public education. I think there needs to be more of a focus on public school funding, instead of private'. Such clarity of thought

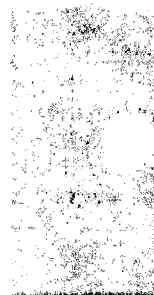
has, of course, been encouraged by a Labor Party so keen to please and placate the private school lobby that it no longer has a genuine commitment to public education. Indeed, prior to the election Prime Minister Gillard announced that her review of Commonwealth schools funding would scrutinise wealthy public schools and possibly cut their funding: 'There are government schools in this country...that are better funded than others for reasons that I don't think are correlated with educational need'. It was good to be reminded that she has her priorities right. And if you think the voters at Figtree Heights are befuddled, can you blame them when the Prime Minister herself is beset by multiple delusions. Meanwhile, as just one example of the perversion of policy fashioned by the private school lobby in league with government, Queenwood School for Girls in Mosman last year generated a surplus of \$4.7 million, having collected \$16.8 million in fees, \$1.06 million in donations and \$3.2 million in government funding.

The large swing to the Greens is promising, as it might just force a re-think in Labor. Don't, however, hold your breath. Also do not forget that the rot really set in with the great historic compromise forged by the Whitlam Government that ended, supposedly, the state aid debate in Australia. State aid, it had been feared by the wealthy private schools, would allow their turf to be trampled on by the Catholic hoi polloi. It was not just the left of politics that opposed state aid in the 1960s. Whitlam's solution—this historic compromise I referred to—was state aid for all. To give Whitlam his due it was meant to be state aid on a needs basis but that deal paved the way for the much worse policies we have now. Moreover, private schools do not have public needs—that, of course, is why they choose to be private. The option of the integration of the Catholic schools, as happened later in New Zealand, might have worked better but it raised serious questions about the importance of secular public education. It is no longer a serious option because the status of all Catholic schools has been lifted and the lobby would refuse integration. In a fundamental sense they are no longer Catholic, as Cardinal Pell recognises, and

SURPLUS \$4.7m



GOVERNMENT FUNDING
DONATIONS
FEES



instead service the middle class or wealthy of all stripes, persuasions and predispositions. Their lobby, in short, pursues the politics of privilege.

Government funding of private schools has been legitimised and naturalised by a discourse that excludes alternatives. This discourse establishes itself as the democratic norm yet it permits no real debate. Basking in the post-election glow of 'education revolution' rhetoric, the Rudd Labor Government presided over more of the same (and will, if given the chance under Gillard, do so again) in schooling policy. Even while acknowledging profound faults in the SES funding model, Labor retains it for at least four years initially and now beyond the next election. The debate has, we are told, moved on. This is code for trampling on the agendas of the Australian Education Union, in particular, and defenders of public schools, in general. Questioning the nature and scope of federal and state funding of private schools is simply old politics. Brand Labor now waves only new flags. Sadly, the trumpeted 'new' stinks of stale power and privilege; the old school tie lives on. And it is all disguised as something else. As R.H. Tawney put it many years ago:

It is the nature of privilege and tyranny to be unconscious of themselves, and to protest, when challenged, that their horns and hooves are not dangerous, as in the past, but useful and handsome decorations, which no self-respecting society would dream of dispensing with.

So the Government's model of inclusion embraces all—there is no difference between public and private schools, it claims—and thus it embraces those who exclude. And even the exclusive schools may now pursue social inclusiveness, offering perhaps to share a football

field here or offer an Aboriginal scholarship there ('accessible and welcoming to all'). And we have all heard the

stories of the cleaner and the single mother (who might just be a senior academic) who scrimped and saved to send the boys to Canberra Grammar or the girls to SCEGGs Darlinghurst.

We are simply in the age of social inclusiveness, so best dress up neoliberal policy accordingly. The horns and hooves alluded to by Tawney become, instead, instances of social inclusion. And, to borrow from Herbert Marcuse, the process is yet another instance of the conjunction of political and advertising language and thus another instance of the convergence of administration and domination. Marcuse put it this way in his still powerful and pertinent book *One Dimensional Man*:

If the language of politics tends to become that of advertising, thereby bridging the gap between two formerly very different realms of society, then this tendency seems to express the degree to which domination and administration have ceased to be a separate and independent function in the technological society.

Teaching, as I do, a remarkable number of advertising and marketing majors in my subject Politics and the Media I am keenly attuned to the paradox that their training in the critical theory I try to present will be turned into another commodity. It is possible and paradoxical that a legion of publicity merchants has been schooled in the art of deception by those most keenly tuned to the sins of deception. Nonetheless, critical theory does expose the fundamentally fraudulent manipulation of words, the sinister implications lurking behind seemingly benign formulations like

'social inclusion'.

When police raid an art gallery, confiscate photos in an exhibition, launch investigations into the artist and his subjects and we still hear politicians and others referring to a 'debate' we had to have, this is the language of total administration disguised as democratic discourse. Perhaps more subtle mechanisms are also at work in other areas of public policy. No need for jackboot diplomacy when we are told by politicians and educational administrators that the debate about public funding of private schools is over. Presumably this is a debate we cannot afford to have. Instead, the then Minister of Education and now Prime Minister Julia Gillard offered us a conversation. How pleasant...just what we needed to give us comfort and take away unnecessary conflict. This, of course, is the language of therapeutic human resources management. To put it another way, it is the language of domination. Alexander Cockburn has noted the ubiquity of conversations in American politics today and highlighted the way they exclude 'unseemly questioning of the essential functionality of the existing system'.

'The old-style education debates need to be updated', Minister Gillard informed us as if she has been injected suddenly with a rash of fashion consciousness. It is, however, fashion courtesy of the private school lobby. This is its language and its style. Then she did offer something supposedly new:

We need a conversation about a transparent, high-quality, well-funded education system for the 21st century; one that focuses on the needs of each student, the quality of our education system and how we can guarantee every child, no matter how rich or how poor, gets the best education possible.

Why on earth do we need a conversation about this? Is it not within the power of government to ensure equitable access to education provision? The answer is very simple. We have two school systems in Australia—one accountable and open to all, the other unaccountable and open to those chosen. The conversation is required to placate those in the second system. We cannot, after all, have government pandering to the public good in an epoch when

private interests still reign supreme despite the raging rhetoric to the contrary. Rudd railed against the politics of greed but refused to recognise it on his own policy doorstep. Rudd and Gillard could do worse than take the wise advice of R.H. Tawney in 1943 regarding private schooling and the politics of privilege:

They [those in private schools] are taught, not in words or of set purpose, but by the mere facts of their environment, that they are members, in virtue of the family bank account, of a privileged group, whose function it will be, on however humble a scale, to direct and command, and to which leadership, influence and the other prizes of life properly belong...If some of the victims continue throughout life, as unhappily they do, to see the world through class spectacles, a policy which insists on their wearing them at school must bear part of the responsibility.

Some might object that most of our private schools bear no resemblance to the grand old English public schools. Yet, increasingly, it is their private status that distinguishes them all, not the fact that some, for instance, are Catholic systemic. Even the systemic schools are private commodities in the education market, and rather cheap ones at that, so they attract many non-Catholic enrolments. Discipline, standards, uniforms, after hours care—these become code for private. And the private does confer a certain status of privilege now (however limited), where once it (in relation to the systemic schools) did not.

Despite financing the politics of privilege, government should still be seen to be doing something on behalf of the public school system. How to do this without offending the powerful private school lobby, without provoking screams about the politics of envy, without challenging the fundamental inequalities of the present system? Invite them to participate in a conversation. The conversation is apparently open to all. Nonetheless, one perspective has been eliminated so it is, in fact, a conversation amongst the chosen few. The endorsement of pre-ordained policy masquerades as a conversation. The Rudd Labor Government mastered the art of

democratic spectacle. No matter that the spectacle simultaneously overwhelms and undercuts the democracy. This is preferable to anti-democratic spectacle, to be sure, but we need to be aware of its limitations. With regard to education policy, the fanfare about lifting everyone up, not cutting some down, drowns out the detail that perpetuates the drift of funds away from public to private schools. Another way of putting it is, to quote Gillard, 'the Rudd Government understands that all schools need certainty and stability'. The collective sigh of relief coming from wealthy private schools that bank on the extra millions they get from the public purse was audible. And the 'needy' private schools, to use a wonderful tautology, gave thanks as well for their interests are with private schools as a whole not with their fellow under-resourced public schools. Too much, of course, has been made of the private school sector that is supposedly poor and open to all. It is neither. Exclusion starts at the front door and government funding has enabled all private schools to achieve levels of financial support that place them, in the main, ahead of public schools in terms of facilities.

GILLARD HIGHLIGHTED THE Government's continued favouring of the private above public system graphically in a speech in 2008 to the Association of Independent Schools. After burying Labor's dark past, one that included reprehensible hit lists (I have already exposed the fallacious thinking here in the pages of *New Matilda*, now it is on the Centre for Policy Studies web site), she signalled a cosy relationship with this inaptly named independent sector. This sector, clearly, is not just part of the conversation. It is at its core. Thus Gillard was at pains to 'reiterate here the Government's support for the full right of parents to choose the school that best meets the needs of their child'. What a convoluted way to defend not only private schooling but its ideological support system. How to define 'best meets the needs of their child'? In private or personal terms of course. We are not, after all, talking about children in general and their collective needs. Choice has rendered that inappropriately old-fashioned. Long gone are the

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days when the vast majority of middle-class parents could afford to decide that the local comprehensive was the school that met the needs of their child. Their child now has a neediness that transcends what the public system can deliver, a neediness defined by private rights and geographical placement away from the hoi polloi.

Julia Gillard must have had a restless night after addressing the Independent Schools. One can visualise the tossing and turning, the discomfort, the persistent knowledge that something did not make sense, that the language concealed a reality with which she was uncomfortable. The more things change, she reassured the lobby, the more things remain the same. So if a school's SES score places it in a category that would deliver it less funds, the rules of the game change. Far from being put in that category, its current funding is guaranteed. The SES model is flawed and Gillard realises this. The eminently sensible idea of getting rid of it is just too preposterous, so instead she makes it even more meaningless. This really is public policy as smoke and mirrors, except the smoke chokes and the mirrors blind. So much for social justice in schooling.

Gillard's new paradigm recognised that 'it is not really possible any more to generalise about any one school system as rich or poor because it is public or private'. There is a partial truth here as some of the private schools are filthy rich. Note the stress on the word system—this signals a further dose of new thinking. She tells us we have to get away from referring to school systems, as it is 'school communities to whom we must target school resources'. A wave of the wand and the system goes, replaced by communities. This is another splendid example of communitarian discourse being appropriated and negated by administrators determined to uphold the ideology of choice. Moreover, we can

have a conversation about community whereas system is almost inherently divisive as it connotes power relationships and mechanisms of control. This language of inclusiveness disguises the systemic inequities guaranteed by current government funding. Under the cloak of togetherness there lurks profound social division.

The first series of the ABC's program on advertising, *The Gruen Transfer*, provoked much public interest and comment. The observation of an advertising heavyweight was particularly notable. Belinda Rowe, chief executive of the Advertising Federation of Australia suggested: 'If there is a conversation around how it [advertising] happens and its magic, then it can only be good for the advertising industry'. Well put. Conversations these days almost invariably benefit powerful private interests. Meanwhile, social inclusion—at one level a noble goal—has replaced equality as a guiding beacon of enlightenment and progress. More than that, it has become a convenient cover for social exclusion.

Nonetheless, the Government pretends to be keen to remedy the unequal performance of schools across Australia. The solution to unequal performance at school and of schools was seen to be the market. Competition, league tables, performance pay, parental choice—these are the lynchpins of a strategy to reform schooling. Or so it seems. In actuality, they constitute a systematic attempt to bypass and undermine teachers' unions. Far from ensuring social inclusion, the market stymies it. Private schools, in particular, protect themselves against failure through various (sometimes very subtle) mechanisms of social exclusion and also testing regimes guaranteed to perform in a predictable fashion. Under the guise of openness, accountability, rigorous performance examination and so on, there lurks a competitive ethos that will almost invariably

cement inequality. As Will Hutton put it last year: 'The over-riding explanation for failing schools is not league tables, bad leadership or poor teaching—it is inequality'. Once this would have been seen as stating the bleeding obvious. Now, however, it is up against a barrage of neoliberal dogma parading itself as common sense.

WHAT THEN OF THE FUTURE, when the recent trends suggest a steady erosion of the public sphere generally and public schools specifically? We can hope and dream, of course. And in a sense we must because it keeps the spirit going. More than that we can mobilise to expose the nefarious role of the private school lobby. We can tie that into the push for campaign and party finance reform because why not also, and perhaps more importantly, reform the process whereby privileged lobbies get automatic access to the Executive. And we can continue the struggle against entrenched power and privilege in other ways. Perhaps we need a social movement like the one that developed around WorkChoices, because it showed that people can be made to care about democratic rights and brought out into the streets to protest about injustice. A future where public schooling is increasingly relegated to the margins is a bleak one indeed. The very future of democracy in Australia requires public schooling to be at the centre of our system, public schooling to define the standards and set the norm and public schooling to be the natural choice of parents, not a deprived product amid an array of impressively endowed private education commodities.

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* This article is based on the Keynote Address given by the author to the State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia Administrators Conference, Perth, 3 September, 2010.