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Anthony Ashbolt
University of Wollongong, aashbolt@uow.edu.au

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Private funding has been taken to extremes

Rescue public schools, not corporate profiteers, writes Anthony Ashbolt.

Kevin Rudd's vigorous attack upon "extreme capitalism" revealed he does not understand the nature of the current crisis.

This is not a meltdown caused purely and simply by rogue traders, bizarre mortgage lending, gross corporate salaries and payouts and, in general, the politics of greed.

All those are symptoms of a much more systemic disease. That disease is the ideology of privatisation and deregulation, an ideology Mr Rudd has shown no inclination to buck.

This Government's embrace of neo-liberal ideology and practice is highlighted by its school funding policy and also its market-driven approach to schooling policy.

The shift of funds from public to private schools is part and parcel of a program to strip the public sphere of assets and boost the private sphere. Our languishing public hospitals are another reflection of this perversion of public policy.

Even the current rescue package is aimed more at salvaging business and promoting consumerism than it is at building necessary public infrastructure.

And that infrastructure does not only involve roads or buildings or alternative energy sources.

All these and more are important but it could also involve the arts community as it did in America during the New Deal. Would there even have been the New York School of abstract expressionism but for the fact that artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were employed as muralists under the Works Progress Administration?

Arts and education should be seen as central to any social and economic reconstruction program. Instead, their funding is whittled away, while the bankers and brokers and boardroom bullies are offered rescue packages.

A bill before the Parliament now guarantees private schools $28 billion of funding for the next four years.

The Government pledged to keep the funding model of the Howard government, a funding model that happily hands over money way above entitlements to many wealthy private schools.

At a time of financial crisis, the Government might have been excused for breaking a pledge and redesigning the funding model.

If belts have to tighten, then wealthy private schools should simply be excluded from any funding. This is not simply a matter of financial restraint, of course, but of social justice.

Moreover, it would start to address the very ideology and way of life that helped get us into this mess the born-to-rule mentality.

There is a way for the Government to redress the gross imbalance in its school funding policy and that is to start tipping the scales back to public schools. Public schools need a massive injection of funds and the financial crisis calls out for this sort of strategy.

The erosion of our public school system has been a direct product of the ideology that fuelled the financial crisis. Rescuing the public schools rather than the corporate profiteers is an urgent priority.