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Public Education and the Public Good

Anthony Ashbolt

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Text of a speech given to the annual conference of the Australian Education Union, Melbourne, January 19, 2010.

When Julia Gillard became Minister for Education and Everything Else That Moves, as well as de facto Prime Minister, she expressed a desire to have a conversation about school funding. This politics of inclusion (social inclusion is one of her many portfolios after all) was short-lived and it became clear that conversation was code for acceptance of the status quo. So Julia went off and had a conversation of her own with utopian dreamers whose vision of the good society revolves around testing regimes, job credentialism, disciplinary control of schools (particularly teachers), and whose heights of ecstasy are only achieved when public schools are closed down at a rapid rate. Their concept of worth, of good, is thoroughly corporatized and their utopia, of course, thus a nightmarish dystopia. That a social democrat, one who had genuine egalitarian tendencies, can become captive of such narrow thinking speaks volumes about our times. Gillard is now part of a political machine that grinds on relentlessly and strips policy-making of critical thought, rendering it ultimately an instrument of bureaucratic apparatchiks some of whom look and sound strangely like Godwin Gretch. Poor old Gretch, you see, is simply the embodiment of a soulless Public Service whose master in reality is the corporate dollar. Patients running the asylum becomes the order of the day not an aberration. In a recent issue of *The Observer* (10 January 2010, p. 32), Will Hutton reminded us of the crucial role played by private schools in perpetuating Britain's class system. He cited the extraordinary statistic revealing that "75% of judges, 70% of finance directors, 45% of top civil servants and 32% of MPs" had been privately educated yet only 7% of children attend private schools. The percentage of Australia's students attending private schools is much larger but the problem is the same. Private education confers privilege and status. It bolsters and reproduces a class-divided society. Yet this is not recognized as a serious public policy issue in the main because class is seen, as Hutton argues, not to matter. He points to the media actively ignoring the question and argues it is because "few leading lights in the media send their kids to state schools. Opening up this argument", he continues, "is unwelcome. Private schools are seen as an entitlement of choice and a response to an instinct that rivals fairness – doing the best for your child". And don't we know that argument here – you simply have to do the best thing for your children. To do otherwise is to harm their life chances. Let us pause and think about that.

What appears common sense and even part of human nature is actually far from good sense and is antithetical to the human instinct of cooperation and solidarity. Private gain for yourself or your child is not the best thing if it undermines actively the public good. And the public good, as the great philosopher Rousseau understood, is something more than an accumulation of private interests. Yet, I am not here mocking or scorning those parents who make what they think is a valid choice of private schooling for their child. I am not moralizing about their personal politics. For they are operating within a social order that has inflated the value of private interests and consequently deflated public interests. They are acting in terms of a zeitgeist shaped by interests pitted against the public sphere, interests that propel a culture of narcissism. It is that culture and its impact upon social policy that needs to be confronted. This, however, takes us back to those remarkable statistics cited by Hutton.

If those in positions of political, social and economic power (cultural power also, of course) have been disproportionately schooled in the private sphere, this has grave implications for democracy. To put it bluntly, the representative nature of democracy crumbles and

disappears; an irony that Rousseau would have appreciated given his conviction that representation itself undermined direct democracy. Let me put it in the Australian context, somewhat different from Britain because the majority of our private schools are not elite schools. Many, indeed, or so we are told, are downright poor but I suspect this is a poverty of spirit and soul rather than one of material possession given the massive financial support given them by Government. When all is said and done, a private school is private (even if in name only). It claims status as a private institution and thus differentiates itself from the public system. So the problem in Australia does not simply revolve around elite private schools, it revolves around the private school system as a whole. And, as an aside, at least the Etons and Harrows of the British world do not receive government subsidies in the way that our Trinity Grammar or Abbotsleigh College do.

The fact, as I have already noted, is that the private education system confers privilege and that it is over-represented in the field of policy-making. Note that only 30% of British MPs were privately educated. The real question, however, is where do they send their children. We know that the answer to this question in Australia is that a disproportionate number of parliamentarians, particularly those in the Executive, and of senior public servants, send their children to private schools. Under these circumstances, a shift in Government policy is highly unlikely as private interests are involved in a way that they should not be in a democracy. Democracy is not achieved by gathering together all the private interests in society – some invariably win over others. There must be a concept of the public good that transcends private interests. A democratic citizen is a public person not a private individual. Representative democracy, so corrupted by its development alongside corporate capitalism, fails to represent properly at all if the representatives are drawn from a narrow social band. One way to guard against this is to have a vibrant public education system, a system that embodies excellence and thus one to which the vast majority of society gives loyalty. The question for a parent about what is the best thing for their child thus becomes irrelevant because the best thing is clearly the guarantee of a good public education. Those who seek escape from the enlightened masses and wish to preserve their peculiar codes of behaviour should be free, at their own expense and within proper public guidelines, to go private. Going private, however, should be the exception not the rule thus prompting parents to be puzzled if their friends express a desire to seek private education for their children. If only...if only this could be the case. Yet it is not a wild dream. It accords with the desires of classic democratic thinkers including some of America's founding fathers – most notably Thomas Jefferson. It is, indeed, the stuff of democracy. Underpinning the public good is a vibrant public education system. When that system suffers and is under siege, as it has been for many years in Australia, the public good begins to wither away and democracy is crushed by those private interests that prevail in a dog-eat-dog world.

The challenge facing us is great, the task daunting. Yet it is not idle dreaming to imagine a revived public school sector in Australia. Future generations should not have to ask our children why they stood by and watched public schools wither on the vine. We must do the best thing for those children now. And the best thing is to remind Government constantly that its obligations are to the public sphere and to the public good that flows from that sphere. The question then is not where do we send our kids but what type of society do we want. If we want a good society, as all the great advocates of democracy historically have urged, the question about where we send our kids becomes, as it should become, redundant.