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Equality, Social Inclusion and School Funding

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Abstract

Private schools are, by their very nature, exclusive. Public schools, in contrast, must cater to all. Now some private schools are still more exclusive than others – Abbotsleigh, Knox Grammar or St. Josephs are part of an elite club to which the Catholic parish school does not belong. Yet, where once there was sectarian and even class division in the ranks of private schools, there is now a unified voice. That is what guaranteed public funding of private schools has produced. Many of you will recall that some of the loudest voices against government funding of private schools in the 1960s were spokesmen for the elite Protestant schools, church leaders frightened of the Catholic hordes who would be granted access to some social wealth if Government was to prop up the parish school. When Whitlam brought in generous school funding, however, a gravy train beckoned and the elite private schools jumped on board. Paradoxically, as greater levels of funding have shifted to the private school sector, the social divide has become much starker than it was in the 1960s. One of the reasons that Australia is a less equal society than it was in the 1960s is the shift from public to private schools aided by Government policy spawned under the false rubric of choice.

Equality, Social Inclusion and School Funding*

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* This is the transcript of a talk given to the Wollongong chapter of the University of the Third Age, August 8, 2011.

Private schools are, by their very nature, exclusive. Public schools, in contrast, must cater to all. Now some private schools are still more exclusive than others – Abbotsleigh, Knox Grammar or St. Josephs are part of an elite club to which the Catholic parish school does not belong. Yet, where once there was sectarian and even class division in the ranks of private schools, there is now a unified voice. That is what guaranteed public funding of private schools has produced.

Many of you will recall that some of the loudest voices against government funding of private schools in the 1960s were spokesmen for the elite Protestant schools, church leaders frightened of the Catholic hordes who would be granted access to some social wealth if Government was to prop up the parish school. When Whitlam brought in generous school funding, however, a gravy train beckoned and the elite private schools jumped on board. Paradoxically, as greater levels of funding have shifted to the private school sector, the social divide has become much starker than it was in the 1960s. One of the reasons that Australia is a less equal society than it was in the 1960s is the shift from public to private schools aided by Government policy spawned under the false rubric of choice.

Allow me to be provocative – private choices should **not** be subsidised by government. Education is too important to be reduced to a matter of consumer choice. The best possible education with the best possible facilities should be available to all, not simply those who can afford it. The fact that our federal

and state governments are providing funds to even the richest (and as we now know, profit-making) private schools should be a scandal. The fact that it is not tells us much about the social consensus manufactured over the last 30 years, a consensus that promotes privilege and entitlement and class prejudice instead of one that promotes the public good.

This has grave implications for the future of democracy in Australia. Democracy is not about private choices but is about the public good. This is not to say that democracy obliterates choice but rather that choice only functions within a framework of the public good. That is why the public education system is and must continue to be a cornerstone of democracy in Australia. That is why the steady erosion of the public schools means also the steady erosion of democracy. A world dominated by private choices is not and cannot be democratic. Invariably, some private choices are more powerful than others. Thus it is that some private schools are in the elite Independent category (independent of what when Government funds all the teachers' salaries?) whereas others might simply be described as non-Government. Yet, to reinforce a point I was making at the outset – they are all, **and very self-consciously**, private. They might boast about their policies of social inclusion – an Aboriginal scholarship here, one for the working class kid there – but their actual policies revolve around systematic exclusion, whether it be on the basis of cost, levels of academic attainment, failure to adhere to the rigours of school discipline or whatever.

There is much more in common now between say Bellambi Holy Spirit College, the Illawarra Grammar School and Cedars Christian College than there would have been thirty years ago. Thirty years ago, indeed, Cedars Christian College would not have existed...the proliferation of Christian schools, many of which are relatively low fee, has only come about with the spread of Government largesse and the abandonment of the sensible policy under the former Hawke-Keating Labor Government that prevented private schools opening where they chose in an area amply provided for by public schools. This New Schools Policy at least provided some restriction upon the proliferation of private schools. At the moment, however, almost any strange sect can (subject to planning approval) set up a school and attain Government funding. Surely not, you must

be thinking. Any strange sect? Perhaps the Exclusive Brethren with its enlightened social outlook does not strike some of you as strange. If so, you would approve of the fact that our Government funds its schools. Why, however the Government would even think of funding a school whose owners and controllers reject tertiary education is simply beyond me. And is it any wonder that the Government has an uphill battle selling the science of climate change when it funds a host of schools which preach creationism while sticking, tightly, of course, to the curriculum.

So there are schools in our society, I would argue, that the Government should not be funding. The problem is that once Government committed itself to funding all private schools, and once it abandoned the New Schools Policy, it did not want to be seen to discriminate. Governments, however, that seek to promote the public good must discriminate against schools that themselves foster discrimination, intolerance and superstition. Some of you might think that includes all private schools and up to a point you would be right. At one level, all private schools think of themselves as the exclusive brethren. It is their private status that matters; it confers automatic privilege. Far from advancing social inclusion, private schools depend upon exclusion.

Social inclusion has become an ideology that masks systematic policies of exclusion. Some noble aspirations might and do lie behind policies of social inclusion. Yet it has come to replace the goal of equality and actually announces a decidedly inegalitarian turn in our society. So we seek not equality but inclusion. This might seem insignificant but it speaks volumes about what sort of society we desire. Take higher education – the current Government believes in making universities more socially inclusive, opening them up to the disadvantaged sectors. Yet this does not address the problem of how we teach ever growing numbers of students. And it does not even begin to address the problem of social inequality that helps create barriers to higher education. What sort of society are we looking to build when the federal Government gives more funds to private schools than to public universities and still tries to talk the language of social inclusion?

We need, I would argue, to revive a sense that equality

is a goal worth striving for. Studies have shown that the most contented societies are also the most equal. Thus it is that Wilkinson and Pickett's survey *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always do Better* reveals that the Nordic countries, for example, are markedly ahead of countries like the United States or Australia in all sorts of social measurements precisely because the levels of inequality there are much lower. One key factor is the strong public schooling systems in these countries. Take Finland, a country that regularly rates at the top or towards the top of international schooling surveys. It is essentially a public system – 99% of children attend public schools. The social and political elite send their children to public schools. The “private” schools that do exist get Government funding and cannot charge fees. So the funding of these schools is not a political issue precisely because the public system is not under threat. Yet when it comes to seeking models of schooling policy our prime Minister looks to Joel Klein in New York whose testing regime and anti-union policies equipped him well for the job in Murdoch's News Corporation he now has. From destroying public schools to destroying culture...that's a mark of progress today. In all of the huffing over News Corp recently, let us not forget that when our prime Minister went to America, she dined with Rupert and more recently met with News Limited editors in a desperate attempt to curry favour. She knows where real power lies.

Does Finland have an obsession with testing? No. It does not need to test and rank schools precisely because all schools receive adequate funding. You don't need a testing regime to tell you that it might be a good idea to increase the funding of public schools in deprived areas markedly. You also do not need tests to show that it might be wise to stop subsidizing private schools with multiple playing fields, swimming pools (including one for water polo), science observatories and goodness knows what else when the public school down the road does not even have an adequate school hall. Finland believes in choice but realizes that in a democratic society the vast majority of people will send their children to well-funded public schools. The United States used to know this too and founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson were loud exponents of the virtue of public education. The once proud and strong public schooling system there has

been running into serious problems as the levels of inequality have risen steadily in society at large. Rising inequality has a negative impact upon public education. A decline in public education in turn feeds growing inequalities. The same is true of Australia.

The Gonski Enquiry into school funding (the national school funding review) might come up with policies that restore more equity to school funding. One does not hold out much hope when out of all sorts of possible chairs of such an enquiry (Justice Michael Kirby would have been ideal) you choose a wealthy businessman who is a product of Sydney Grammar School and Chair of the Board of Trustees of Sydney Grammar from 2003–2010. It's a little like selecting James Murdoch to chair an enquiry into media ethics. Maybe, however, Gonski can transcend his class and school interests and produce some positive policy ideas. Even if that were to happen one does not have confidence in Government to implement them, precisely because Government has become captive of the private school lobby.¹ And what a powerful lobby it has become, one that fosters all sorts of mythologies to prop its own system up. One of those mythologies revolves around the so-called "hit list".

A number of years ago in the pages of the on-line magazine *New Matilda*, I exposed the mythology surrounding Mark Latham's "hit list": <http://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/227/> The mythology (the editors chose not to use that term but I'll stick with it)... the mythology is this – Latham's "hit list" of private schools is one reason his campaign for office failed. It was, supposedly, an immensely unpopular policy. That is simply wrong and it is a mythology created by the Liberal Party in league with the private school lobby and a mass media all too ready to use the term "hit list"; a mythology so powerful as to convince Labor politicians that it is the objective truth. The fact is this – every opinion poll taken at the time showed that Latham's school funding policy was popular. It even registered as popular with the worm during the leaders' debate.

What lesson is there to learn from this? We need a Government brave enough stand up to the rhetoric of the private school lobby, to shake off the mythology surrounding the supposed hit list. You might recall that the wealthy private schools singled out by the Latham policy were not going to have

one cent taken away from them; their funding was to be capped. The mythology, of course, was that, due to “the politics of envy”, the Government was bent on destroying these schools. Combine “hit list” with “the politics of envy” and you have an apparently potent brew that will instill fear into the aspirational classes. Yet at the time, I repeat, the policy was popular.

I would contend a similar policy or one that is even more far-reaching in restoring public school funding can also be popular if Government was once again to embrace the democratic goal of equality. This means speaking the language of equality rather than the language of social inclusion, the language of rights to a decent public education instead of the language of choice.

Notes

1. The Gonski report was released early in 2012 and does recommend a more equitable system and, most promisingly, a large injection of funding, particularly to public schools. Its agenda however, was limited by the Government insistence that no school lose its current funding levels. Moreover, it recommends a voucher system for disabled students and this would be the thin end of the wedge. And as predicted in this paper, the Government looks set not to act on its positive recommendations. Meanwhile, the steady drift of funding towards private schools continues: Andrew Stevensen, “Labor funds for private schools still on the rise”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 6–8, 2012, p.5.