STATE AID
W. E. Gollan
RE-THINKING
THE ISSUES

A noted educationist discusses State Aid as one of the issues involved in the context of the wider problem of educational reform.

THE NEED for educational reform in Australia is not in dispute. Facing the era of technology and automation with their associated social and economic problems, the Australian governments have already partially modified their former attitudes to education. The problems are legion, as is only to be expected when a deep-seated change is under way in technology, with corresponding social changes, which in the next few decades will have increasingly profound effects on society.

The first task is to raise the general level of education, and ensure that greater percentages than in the past proceed to higher education (advanced technical, university and other forms of tertiary education) — an inescapable consequence of passing into an age when science and technology play such a dominant role in production. However, this is merely the beginning. Other urgent questions demand a solution: the quality of education, preparation for life, for democratic participation in the life of society based on peace among the nations, the re-training of workers and technicians made redundant by technological advance, and countless others.

To what extent have Australian governments faced these issues?

The Murray and Martin Reports on tertiary education and their partial implementation have certainly radically revised the scale of governmental financial provision for education. From $4.2 million in 1945-46, direct expenditure on education by the Commonwealth rose to $127.8 million in 1955-56, the greater part on tertiary education.

The result has been a considerable expansion in this field, but even so the figures below demonstrate Australia’s relatively retarded position:

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<th>First degrees completed in relation to total population—1963</th>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>246 per 100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>130 ” ”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>66 ” ”</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
<td>56 ” ”</td>
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<th>First degrees completed in relation to population of the appropriate age—1963 %</th>
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<tr>
<td>USA (age 21)</td>
<td>17.9</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
<td>5.5</td>
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<td>Australia</td>
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Furthermore, the staff-student ratio in Australian universities is heavily inferior to that in Britain, the United States or the USSR. At the universities, as at all levels of education, students and staff suffer from an unimaginative and inadequate provision. In Australia approximately 3.8% of the gross national product is expended on education as against 5 to 6% in Great Britain and the USA. Even the minimum proposals for university education were cut by $56,000,000 in the 1966-67 budget.

**PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**

The attitude of successive Federal Liberal governments to the basic educational structure in Australia, the state of affairs existing in the primary and secondary schools, has been to refuse even to examine the facts. Repeated demands by teachers, parents, and, in fact, most sections of the community, for an inquiry into primary and secondary education have been stubbornly rejected.

In place of this obvious and necessary action the Menzies and Holt Governments have chosen a diversionary move to provide marginal benefits for the non-government sector in education, the most recent being the increased provision of facilities for science teaching, and the allocation of 10% of places in the new Teachers' Colleges financed by the Federal Government to trainees for non-government schools. As to the facilities for the teaching of science, the schools at present receiving aid fall into the following categories: Government schools 204; Non-government schools 508.

The 1966 election proposals of the Holt Government will double the amount to non-government schools, raising the ratio from 5:2 to 5:1 in favor of non-government schools.

The spokesmen for the Roman Catholic hierarchy during the Federal elections made it clear that they understood very well that the Holt Government's financial proposals would give only marginal assistance to the Catholic schools, struggling as they are in an intense crisis of understaffing and overcrowding. As Bishop Cullinane stated, “I feel that (Mr. Holt's policy statement) shows a complete lack of understanding of the problem facing Catholic parents, I fail to see how Mr. Holt can consider realistic his declared policy on assisting non-government schools.” And as Father Dennis Healy stated (Australian, April 1, 1967) “The promises of both Mr. Holt and Mr. Calwell were calculated to win votes rather than solve a problem that seriously affected the national interest.”

However, the Holt Government, confident of the support of the DLP on its general reactionary policy and knowing full well that the right-wing forces in the hierarchy would under no circum-
stances support the Labor Party with its anti-Vietnam war and anti-conscription policies, did not feel any compulsion to expand its State aid program except in minor details. The paltry allocations to the Federal Department of Education and Science in the 1967-68 budget make no material difference to the situation.

The general direction of “State aid” in fact, as it is being applied by the Holt Government, far from improving the lot of the poorer schools, is providing increased handouts to the schools of privilege, and leaving the general crisis in the non-government schools untouched.

It is in the Catholic parish schools that the crisis has taken on its most extreme form. “John Manning” writing in the Sydney Bulletin of February 4, 1967, from a “contemporary” Catholic position asserts that the arch-diocese of Sydney faces a shortage of $4,000,000 in estimated expenditure for the 1964-67 period, that the Canberra diocese has a $4,000,000 building debt and that the Queanbeyan parish, typical of a number, has a building fund debt of $150,000. Some schools have already closed and others must inevitably do so, as the Catholic school population pressure mounts. Between 1947 and 1961, according to the same writer, the Catholic population of Australia increased by 65% but Catholic school enrolment by 102%.

One result of the Roman Catholic population increase and the crisis in Catholic education has been a sharp increase in Roman Catholics among State school pupils—in NSW from 10.3% in 1955 to 13.7% in 1966, an increase of 36,000 children. (Department of Education statistics quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald 26.4.67).

A NEW APPROACH TO “STATE AID” IN THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

Growing numbers of the Catholic laity and a section of the clergy are currently engaged in a serious reappraisal of the relevance of the state aid issue in Australian public life, and in a basic questioning of the whole concept of separate Catholic education.

For some Catholics this attitude has its roots in a pragmatic approach. It is becoming more widely understood that the parish schools are unable to cope with the demands of contemporary education and are providing an inferior training for their pupils. Allied to this is the growing realisation that massive state aid as proposed by the hierarchy is a chimera, that whilst marginal benefits flow from the role of education as a political football, the kind of aid needed to give the child attending the parish schools equality of opportunity with those in the State schools is not a realisable political objective.
The only policy that would give equality of opportunity to Catholic children and remove the special burden borne by Catholic parents would be to subsidise Catholic schools on a pupil basis on a parity with the amount spent per pupil in the State schools. Clearly such a proposal is utopian and the solution in the interest of both Catholic parents and children as well as the community generally must be sought in other directions.

Catholics like all members of the community are becoming more and more aware of the serious defects and inadequacies of even much of state education in Australia; not to speak of the very backward state of affairs in the parish schools. Furthermore, it is clear that Catholic thinking is going far beyond the alleged benefits that would flow from massive state aid to Catholic schools, to wider questions of the kind of education needed for all men in contemporary society. This is an integral part of the "aggiornamento" (the move to face contemporary problems of man in society) whose first important public expression was the papal encyclical *(Pacem in Terris)* of Pope John XXIII.

The sharp criticism by an Australian bishop of the views of a visiting American theologian and the equally sharp reaction of a section of the Catholic laity in defence of freedom of thought and expression was a dramatic revelation to many of the depth of the discussion now proceeding in Roman Catholic circles. The demands within the church for greater freedom, the emphasis on the responsibility of the individual, the questioning of dogmatism and of doctrinaire authoritarianism, the attempt to relate Catholic teaching to the advances in modern scientific knowledge, the concepts of humanism, that man and not merely Catholic man should be the object of the church's interest; even that catholics and communists could find a common basis in joint activities against war and for human welfare — all these and many other problems are matters of urgent investigation and discussion in Catholic circles.

It is against this background that the debate on State aid is beginning to take on an entirely new emphasis in the thinking of an influential and growing section of Catholic opinion. Included in this is the insistence by growing numbers of Roman Catholic parents on genuine freedom of choice of schools for their children; a refusal to be bound by the dogma of the bishops of "every Catholic child in a Catholic school." "John Manning" gives clear expression to this growing set of opinions, still comparatively new in Australia, but expressing a world-wide ecumenical trend within the Catholic Church, which the reactionary forces still promoting state aid as the major question will ignore at their peril. Says John Manning:

In the aggiornamento, pre conciliar parochialism bows out to ... a commitment to the needs of man ... peace pleas ... priests in freedom marches
and the laity chiding a bishop for his nastiness to a nun. Small wonder then that State aid as a top priority . . . produces a pantomimic tediousness for a growing number of Catholics . . . (State aid pros and cons) are of minor importance for Catholics . . . Parochial schools are only small fish in the renewal that the (Vatican) council urges Catholics to embrace in order to flee the marginal in their lives and enter the mainstream that adult man frequents in his quest for life.

A further problem, which has so far been evaded but must inevitably compel attention, is that of the degree of State supervision and control as public funds are advanced to private institutions. Clearly the question of the standards of education, qualifications of teachers and allied matters, will call for an increasing degree of State intervention and control, as the extent of aid increases.

These ideas are given a more comprehensive and precise expression by Father Dennis Healy (Australian 1/4/67) who clearly represents a fundamental questioning of the whole concept of state aid as it has hitherto been conceived by the Conference of Bishops. Commencing from the position of the responsibility of Catholics to mankind as a whole, Father Dennis Healy concludes that this (new) emphasis “tends to render invalid one of the main reasons for a separate Catholic education system.”

As an alternative to the dual system he proposes that the Roman Catholic church should confine its “educational activity to what it can afford without placing special burdens on Catholic parents; that some brothers and nuns should become teachers in state schools; and that a national commission of enquiry into Catholic schools should be established with the function of investigating the present situation of Catholic schools in Australia and making recommendations to the Federal Ministry of Education and to the Conference of Catholic Bishops on whether the present dual system is in the best interest of the church and the nation.”

When two Catholic priests raise such questions in papers so widely apart as the Bulletin and the Australian, it is clear that an important segment of Catholic opinion is pointing the way towards a reassessment of the whole traditional position of the church; and to unity of action that can end the present unprincipled attitude to State aid by the Liberal Party, which has manoeuvred the ALP into abandoning its principled position for an opportunist one, damaging both to the ALP itself and to educational progress. The possibility may not be remote of unity of action by all Australians irrespective of religious belief to secure for all Australian children and youth the education necessary for life in modern society.