

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT

SCHOOLS

Press Release 758

CATHOLIC EDUCATION ELECTIONEERING SPURS A BACKLASH

Special Deals with Bishops

Since the 1960s the political tactics of the Catholic education lobby have changed little: Back the winner in a close contest, then claim the ‘Catholic vote made all the difference!’

This was the way the DLP worked in the 1950s and 1960s. Until the DOGS entered the political scene and the voting went the other way.

This is also what has happened in the recent Longman and Batman by-elections. The Catholic education authorities assessed which party was likely to win – then entered these by-elections in the final week. In Batman, the Greens had blown themselves apart in wrangling and the Labor candidate was set to win when the Catholic Education Office entered the race with robo calls.

Labor won and Bingo! The Catholic vote made all the difference!

In Longman, Labor held Longman but polls showed it on a knife-edge, with One Nation's preferences likely to be key to deciding the result. The Liberal candidate told a fib about a service medal, and some One Nation preferences fled to Labor. Then Catholic authorities made a last ditch intervention in the Longman by-election, telling parents their schools would get another \$250 million under Labor.

Labor won and Bingo! The Catholic vote made a difference!

The Catholic Education Offices and the Archbishops want the ‘special deals’ provided Catholic schools since the introduction of State Aid in the 1960s to continue. They want an open door into the public Treasury with no strings attached. They want financial entanglement of Church and State but talk separation of Church and State when it comes to accountability.

- Forget any pretence at a ‘Needs’ policy. Catholic schools have been arguing against the coalition's school funding policy after it was changed to a needs-based model, where funding was taken from richer schools and moved to poorer ones. They have always favoured rich schools over poorer ones.
- Forget the fact that public money is being used by the Catholic sector to interfere in the democratic political process.
- Forget the plain fact that many schools are ‘overfunded’ and there is minimal accountability.
- Forget the fact that Australia does not need Gonski 2.0. It needs a Royal Commission into the roting of public funds by the private education sector. DOGS believe the

antics of the banks and the financial sector pale before those of the private education sector. Birmingham was starting to realise his unenviable position.

Many of the private schools are being publicly funded up to, and, in many cases beyond the public funding available to the public sector.

It is time Australia got rid of the sectarian, inefficient, uneconomic and privileged funding of the private sector. They are already paid for.

It is a disgrace that our Prime Minister, worried about a few uncertain votes, goes cap in hand to Catholic Archbishops suing for peace and promising OUR taxes willy nilly.

A proud democratic government should tell the private sectarian sector that public money is for public schools only. He who pays the piper must not only call the tune, but be answerable for it.

Yet - Once Again this political tactic has worked. Or Has it?

Prime Minister Turnbull has taken over negotiations with the Archbishops, Bishops and Catholic bureaucrats from Education Minister Birmingham who, to give him credit, was doing something. He was showing some awareness and reacting to complaints of the Auditor General about the lack of public accountability with private education funding. Birmingham was actually taking his Ministerial responsibility seriously.

But as the *Australian* newspaper gives coverage to the Catholic sector entering negotiations for its 'special deals' the non-Catholic private sector have woken up. They might get left behind – again. Yet you discover this, not from the Murdoch but from the Fairfax Press.

On 31 July 2018 David Crowe of the Age informs us that a 'School Funding War has Erupted' and groups representing 650 private schools across three states have fired off a blistering letter to Mr Turnbull demanding an urgent meeting to ensure he does not strike a "special deal" with Catholic schools to give them an unfair advantage. Non-Catholic private school families are being warned of another damaging "funding war" over education that could lift their fees and close services, in a new challenge to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to rule out a deal that could cost independent schools \$1 billion over a decade. Crowe writes:

Parents would react with "dismay and anger" if the government gave in to a political campaign by Catholic schools to extract a special deal, wrote Independent Schools of NSW chief Geoff Newcombe, Independent Schools Victoria chief Michelle Green and Independent Schools of South Australia Carolyn Grantskalns.

"We support more funding for all schools, regardless of sector, as long as there is a level playing field," they said.

“This recent campaign, however, has used the rhetorical stereotypes of class warfare, impugned the integrity of staff in independent schools, and published ‘hit lists’ of selected independent schools.

“It would be a backward step if, as a result of this political pressure, we return to the funding wars, in which the stereotypes of ‘class warfare’ and ‘hit lists’ re-emerge in practical form.”

.....Catholic school authorities used a meeting with Education Minister Simon Birmingham on Tuesday to press for a resolution within weeks with a revised formula to increase their funding.

“It was a productive discussion, but it’s now crunch time for some key decisions to put these issues to bed,” said Dallas McInerney, the chief executive of Catholic Schools NSW.

“We’ll meet again within a fortnight to address the outstanding matters that need resolution.

“We’re trying to ensure the government has a fairer funding model in place for all schools.”

The growing dispute centres on a review of the school resourcing funding model by company director Michael Chaney and others, setting the framework for an attempted compromise with Catholic and independent schools.

Fairfax Media understands the independent school sector fears it could lose \$1 billion over a decade under some proposals to help the Catholic sector, tilting the playing field in the competition over fees and services.

So much for the undemocratic, selfish, privileged private sector gouging public funds out of an ever shrinking Treasury. As their screaming representatives clash with the Catholic authorities, exploding with fears of falling into a new class of ‘losers’, there is no mention of the vast majority of Australian children enrolled in the public, inclusive, non sectarian schools throughout the nation.

Fairfax provides the following figures.

There are 1730 Catholic schools educating round 760,000 students across the country.

There are 1061 independent schools educating 604,000 students.

There are 6639 public schools with 2.52 million students across the country.

As an afterthought public schools which educate by for the majority of Australian children - got a mention...

AEC president Correna Haythorpe said Mr Turnbull should restore \$1.9 billion in funding for public education rather than strike special deals.

“Public schools were victims of savage funding cuts under Gonski 2.0, and they must have their funding restored before Mr Turnbull considers any further special funding deals for private schools,” Ms Haythorpe said.

DOGS are not alone. Here are two of the 362 comments on the David Crowe Age article:

Batlow

The solution is simple. Public schools should be funded from the public purse. Private and religious "schools" are organisations which have opted out of the public system. They can fund their undertaking from their own resources. If private schools cannot sustain themselves financially, they should give up (or "go broke" in business parlance), and let the children return to the normal public education system.

There are many sophistry-based counter arguments, I know; but the debate to keep raging decade after decade, ever weakening our education system. It's very simple. In Australia education is universal, secular and free. There is not one single good reason why anyone needs to attend any school, other than a public school. Public education is good for Australia.

Just think how much better off Australia would be, if Tony Abbott had attended Chatswood High School instead of a private "school".

Sterling

My kids go to an independent school (non-denominational) and I do think that students of these schools should be funded. BUT the majority of funds should go to government schools, and private schools should stop investing ridiculous amounts into facilities that are elitist and unnecessary, and then still expect funding. The last thing I want my children to be educated in is the art of snobbery. Private schools need to get a grip!

And this is what Chris Bonner's reaction:

Catholic school funding: here we go again

I have a great idea to fix the drought. Give farmers drought relief, extend it to better-endowed areas with access to water –and continue it long after the rain returns. The farmers I know would be horrified if this happened.

But when it comes to school funding the Catholic bishops have no such shame. Every attempt to establish needs-based funding is manipulated

to appease the private school sectors-and the resulting distortions become a permanent part of the school landscape.

This pattern is decades-old, beginning around the time needs-based school funding was undermined in the Whitlam years. In the recent two decades both the Howard and Gillard governments went through the motions of needs-based funding, while feather-bedding the non-government sector. It's on again. Following the recent by-elections -and almost before the tumult and shouting has died down –another government has lent a willing ear to the dubious school funding claims of the Catholic bishops.

According to *The Australian*, PM Turnbull's willingness to listen has been hurried along by last weekend's tilt by the bishops to influence the voters. It raises a host of questions, not least about who paid for their latest electoral foray. The enduring myth about the extra money sought by the bishops is that it is needed to make up the 'shortfall' created by the Turnbull Government's otherwise feeble 'Gonski 2.0' equity funding –which included attempts to reduce the impact of previous special deals.

But in the eyes of the bishops, yesterday's special deals have become today's and tomorrow's fixture. There will always be winners and losers if governments are serious about equity funding. Public schools lost –they have to wait for a decade to possibly see greater equity. The Independents are going to lose (and the Catholics gain) if funding needs are calculated –as they should be around parental incomes. And funding should always be adjusted –including being reduced –as the school circumstances change. Welcome to the real world. It is highly likely that the Catholic schools will get what they want. Labor threw in the towel decades ago; it is surprising that education minister Birmingham has held the line for as long as he has.

What might complicate matters is the rapid intervention of Independent school peak groups, reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on August 1. They declared they supported more funding for all schools, regardless of sector... adding, without any hint of irony, "as long as there is a level playing field". The recent Catholic campaign, they said: "has used the rhetorical stereotypes of class warfare, impugned the integrity of staff in independent schools, and published 'hit lists' of selected independent schools. It would be a backward step if, as a result of this political pressure, we return to the funding wars, in which the stereotypes of 'class warfare' and 'hit lists' re-emerge in practical form. Heady stuff indeed and not a public schoolie in sight. Perhaps like me they just love to watch!

Amidst all this an interesting perspective on the Catholic campaign seems to have been missed. As always in the past the campaign has highlighted the likelihood of school fees rising and schools closing – 350 schools this time around.

They only had to close schools once (Goulburn 1962) to put the fear of God -or his earthly underlings -into politicians. But the context in which this all plays out has considerably changed. The financial costs to governments of Catholic school closures are nowhere near what they would have been in the past. In recurrent funding terms Catholic schools in Australia are already government schools. Most are funded at well over 90% of the public funding going to government schools. Independent schools are fast catching up. Many could be closed with governments ending up financially ahead.

In completing research for a recent discussion paper, I had a closer look at the relationship between government and Catholic schools in 71 small NSW towns. Funding two competing small schools in each of these towns is very expensive for governments –the recurrent funding costs for all the schools was \$330 million in 2016.

On completing a paper ‘merge’ of the schools in each town I discovered that the recurrent cost to governments fell by 10%. Even if remotely equivalent figures could be scaled across Australia the savings to government of a more efficient provision of schools would be substantial. Obviously many factors come to bear on decisions about closing schools, but perhaps those running the current Catholic campaign need to bring themselves up to date with some fiscal realities. Then again, none of this will feature in the ongoing jockeying around school funding. The actors come and go but the script for how it will play out has been around for a long time.

Chris Bonnor is co-author with Jane Caro of The Stupid Country, New South Wales, 2007

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