

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT

SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 759

PLUS CA CHANGE

Election year 2018 and the State Aid debate is on again. But wasn't State Aid to private schools taken out of politics in 1973 with the 'Needs' policy? And doesn't the Fairfax media editor tell us that that Gonski principles are not '*election pork*'¹ The problem is that, from 1972 to 2018, all 'Needs-based' funding arrangements have been 'gamed' by the private religious sector. Chris Bonner², a retired public school Principal and educationist, contemplates the situation:

On the current State Aid debate 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.

DOGS reaction ? What did you expect? Why surprise and outrage?

Australian educational historians tend to analyse change rather than continuity. Change has occurred and, if we are not to be engulfed by our history, we need to believe that it is always possible. That is why DOGS persist with their promotion of a democracy with public education available to all children and oppose a selective, sectarian system for a plutocracy or oligarchy. We confront

¹ Editorial : *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 2018

² Chris Bonnor is co-author with Jane Caro of *The Stupid Country*, New South Wales, 2007. He is aware of recent history: *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.*

continuities in the educational and social relay race imposed on Australian children.

The wealthy in Australia have always been reluctant to pay taxes, and aspirational parents have always wanted to buy special opportunities for their children. Religious organisations have always been ready to demand special treatment for God's chosen. The privatised rhetoric grows tattered and adjusts, but questioning of privilege arouses protest. Catholic bishops in particular are consistent. As in New South Wales in 1880, so in 2018, they demand 'special deals' - extensive State funding - with minimal strings attached. In 1880 there were no 'deals'. But, since the 1960s their political influence has prospered.

Meanwhile, disadvantaged children in public schools receive crumbs from the private school table while federal State Aid is channelled to a well endowed private sector.

There has always been a realisation amongst public school advocates, going back to William Wilkins, Henry Parkes, and others that only a free, secular and universal system of education open to all children, could minimise inequalities of educational opportunities for the next generation. But whereas nineteenth century politicians and administrators called the bluff of the religious sector on elementary education, dominance of secondary education and tertiary opportunities was never ceded to public schools. Unlike their nineteenth century forebears, contemporary politicians wilt before private school lobbying. Many are alumni enjoying privileges of Old Boy networks.

In the 1950s, with the introduction of comprehensive high schools in the public sector, it looked possible for Australia to follow the Scandinavian countries rather than the class conscious United Kingdom. In Norway, royal children attend public schools, while in Finland it is illegal to charge fees. But no. Selective High Schools continued and State Aid to private schools was introduced by the Menzies government. A limited meritocracy was the best on offer. Cyril Wyndham, the NSW Director General, and architect of the comprehensive secondary school, wept for lost opportunities.

In 1972, DOGS (The Defence of Government Schools) organisation staged 'Schools with the Pools' demonstrations exposing the facilities of wealthy private schools.³ State school administrators⁴ and concerned publicists and academics like T. Roper⁵ and H. Karmel⁶ also exposed existing inequalities.

³ 'Pools of Privilege?' NSW Teachers Federal Journal, *Education*, 15 March 1972

⁴ *Nationwide Survey of Needs*, AEC, 1961; *A Statement of Some Needs of Australian Education*, AEC 1963;

⁵ T. Roper, *The Myth of Equality*, NUAUS 1970.

⁶ P. Karmel, 'Some Arithmetic of Education', *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 1966, pp. 3-27.

The Labor Party, desperate for the ‘Catholic’ vote, invented the ‘Needs’ Policy and the Schools Commission. ‘State Aid was taken out of politics’. Or was it?

The ‘Needs’ policy was ‘gamed’ from the beginning. Professor Karmel had terms of Reference. The Interim Karmel Committee report stated:
‘..the needs of the schools cannot be considered only in terms of ‘more of the same’; yet the Committee was required to make its recommendations in terms of structures which exist and which it has little direct power to modify.’

Unable to confront social and religious elites, Karmel watched helplessly as the elastic concept, ‘need’, was transformed into ‘needfulness’ for those with wealth and power. When a 1973 ‘hit list’ of schools whose facilities were ‘above standard’⁷ was proposed, by Karmel, there was outrage. The Minister for Education, Kim Beazley assured affected schools that
*‘They are all subject to appeal. Some of them have put in wrong returns.’*⁸

The situation was remedied. No-one lost out. There was no personnel, inclination nor time to investigate quantifiable aspects of private or church resources available to the private sector. Nothing has changed.⁹

The ‘myth’ of equality persisted and continues to inspire rhetorical flourishes. Public schools even received some desperately needed federal funding in the years 1973-1978. Their representative on the Schools Commission, Joan Kirner was an enthusiastic promotor of the ‘Needs’ policy. But in 1984 when teacher representative Van Davy and public school parent Joan Brown, issued dissenting reports, the Schools Commission was quietly abandoned. The State Aid debate persisted, alongside growing and outrageous inequalities.

In the 1970s and 1980s ‘bottom of the schoolyard’ schemes paralleled ‘bottom of the Harbour schemes’ in the taxation evasion industry. DOGS exposed them in paid Advertisements.¹⁰ It is only billions of dollars later, and the MySchool

⁷ Report of Commonwealth Auditor General 2008; Report of Victorian Auditor General 2017.

⁸ *House of Representatives, Debates*, 11 October 1973, p. 2004

⁹ Report of Auditor General,

¹⁰ For example, *The Age*: 12 November 1970; 27 November, 1972, 4; 16 May 1973, 10; 12 July 1973, 14; 12 December 1975, 12; 23 June 1977, 16; 2 December 1977; 5 December, 1977, 12; 3 May 1984, 18; 28 November 1984, 20; 1 May 1985; 30 August 1988, 22-23; 2 March 1998, 11; April 26, 2005; 27 March 2006; *The Herald*: 1 December 1972, 11; 11 December 1975, 38; *The Australian* : 10 December 1975, 5; 19 July 1985, 7; *Canberra Times*: 18 December 1980; 4 November 1983, 11; 6 April 1984, 9. Advertisements since this time did not deal with the Schools Commission.

website figures telling their own, albeit limited story, that Auditors General¹¹ and Mr Birmingham have woken up to the State Aid scandal.¹²

Gonski was also hemmed in by 'Terms of Reference'. In 2011 Prime Minister Gillard told his Committee to be 'sector blind'; In 2017 Prime Minister Turnbull repeated the exercise. Gonski had to retain existing funding arrangements.

Continuity rather than change has been the result; compromise rather than confrontation the process. Public schools remained the poor relations in terms of funding, - but not performance. However, meritocratic stories still prove the exception rather than the rule in Australian political, legal, and Board room elites.

In the 1960s, DOGS (The Defence of Government Schools organisation) predicted that the re-introduction of direct State Aid to private schools¹³ would lead to greater inequality of educational opportunities for larger numbers of children. They also pointed to the issue of separation of religion from the State and, after 15 years eventually got to the High Court. Although they were forced into a 26 day Trial of Facts in which the religious sector attempted to prove that religious schools were not religious institutions – they persisted. In 1981 Section 116 was read down and out of the Constitution. The 1981 DOGS case decision has been questioned in recent years.¹⁴ And in 2018 Churches are dismayed at their loss of 'religious liberty'. The perennial issue of religion and the state has never gone away.¹⁵ Justice Lionel Murphy's dissent stands for future generations.¹⁶

For decades DOGS were disparaged and any media coverage given to their No-State Aid position and the gaming of the Needs policies was through paid

¹¹ Victorian Auditor General: Grants to Non-Government Schools 9 March 2016, <https://www.audit.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/20160309-Grants-to-NG-schools-presentation.pdf>
NSW Auditor General Grants to non-government schools 3 May 2018, at <https://www.google.com/search?q=australian+auditor+general+non-government+schools+&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox->

¹²

¹³ After cessation of more than half a century position - with the exception of Queensland which introduced State Aid to private schools as a 'scholarship' system in 1899.

¹⁴

¹⁵

¹⁶ *Attorney General for the State of Victoria (at the relation of Ian John Black and Others) and the Commonwealth of Australia and Others*, (1981) 146 CLR, 559. The story of this sad reflections on our legal situation and basic issues of religious liberty is told in 'Jean Ely, *Contempt of Court*, Melbourne, Dissenters Press, printed by Arena, 2011.15.

Advertisements.¹⁷ But in 2018 they find themselves entering a mainstream undercurrent. Public school supporters now 'follow the money' rather than the rhetoric¹⁸ as they mine the MySchool website.

As Chris Bonner has noted,¹⁹ the current State Aid situation is not dissimilar to that of the 1870s. Then as now, economic and duplication arguments apply. In recurrent funding terms Catholic schools in Australia are funded at well over 90% of the public funding going to government schools. Non-Catholic schools are fast catching up. Many duplicate public facilities. Closures would place governments financially ahead.

¹⁷ See footnote 8 above.

18 Consider the following media discussion noted by Chris Bonner in his media website in April 2018.

- Interesting report from [The Guardian](#) on disadvantaged schools
- Fairfax does a quick cut of *My School* school funding figures to tell us what we already know: 'Private schools getting \$6700 more per student than NSW public schools'. More interesting is 'Richest private schools get payment from \$7m government 'slush fund'. i.e. the fund to ease them into their new era of 'cut-backs' (?) Again on funding it appears (*The Age*) that [Victoria is signing up](#) to the 80:20 (actually 75:25) funding arrangement.
- The 80:20 / 20:80 Gonski 2.0 funding plan has come under deserved criticism and the problems won't go away. **For a clear explanation of these problems, read [When 20 and 80 don't add up](#)**, by Lyndsay Connors and Jane Caro. Also from Lyndsay Connors, an [outstandingly worded challenge](#) to the Victorian Catholic Education Commission's robocalling stunt during the Batman by-election. Answers are needed!
- [Fin Review reports](#) (April 4) that the Gonski 2.10 review will be released later in April and will recommend stronger evidence-based teaching.
- David Hetherington (Public Education Foundation) has wrapped numbers around student underachievement and come up with a price tag of increasing inequality. Widely reported: [ABC](#), [SMH](#), [Guardian](#). Adam Rorris did a similar exercise [around retention rates](#) two years ago.
- If you want to do well as school it seems you have to choose your grandparents as well as your parents. [SMH reports](#) on new research.
- More on the Barbara Preston's latest landmark [Social make-up of schools](#) report has just been released. Trevor Cobbold provides a [useful summary](#)
- ['Is it time to shut Goulburn's Catholic school doors...again?'](#) It appears that the public purse might end up better off! [Slightly longer version](#) in *Inside Story*.

LISTEN TO THE DOGS PROGRAM

855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS

<http://www.3cr.org.au/dogs>