AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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PRIVATE SCHOOLS ARE THE *REAL* PROBLEM :

BUT: WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

Definition of the Problem

A recent book by Francis Green and David Kynaston entitled ***Engines of Privilege*** 2018 (Bloomsbury)define the private school problem as a cycle of privilege with the corollary of 'reproduction of social class'. They argue that

> it is hard to imagine a notable improvement in social mobility or growing inequalities while private school continues to play an important role. Allowing an unfettered expenditure on high-quality education for only a small minority of the population condemns our society to seeming perpetuity to a damaging degree of social segregation and inequality

They identify continuing problems, in Britain. These can also be identified in Australian political, legal and social culture during the last fifty years: They are:

- A lack of intellectual will, even among progressives, to prioritise the issue;
- a lack of political will to take on majority, long-established institutions;
- the personal' embeddedness' of the schools in those in power or positions of influence, because of their own schooling and/or their parental choices;
- an enduring attachment to libertarianism at the expense of equality of opportunity; and, similarly enduring,
- the fallacious belief- in effect wishful thinking – that the schools will somehow' wither' away.

They conclude that, if serious action is ever to be taken about a deeply damaging private school problem in Britain, these problems will have to be surmounted in coming years.

They list options for reform and recommendations.

Some Answers to the English Problem

Green and Kynaston believe there are 'valid, well founded policies which would address, in varying degrees, British private school problems. They canvass

- Contextual university admissions – i.e. limits on enrolments of graduates from private schools.
- Removal of the charitable status from private schools
- Taxation of school fees

- Forms of partial integration including both an Open Access Scheme and a Fair Access Scheme

Above all they believe the time is ripe for a concerted debate about reform policies: not running away from the problem, not just a wringing of hands about depressingly stagnant social mobility, not just another solutions –free expose of social and educational divisions.

However, at this point the authors refuse to confront the 'politics of hypocrisy;, as they term it, because they argue that questioning aspirational parents effectively closes down rather than opens debate.

In other words, they draw back from confronting, naming or shaming insecure or just plain snobbish parents. WHY?

They note that there are a high percentage of private school 'insiders' – 64% in the UK who consider the education system 'unfair'. And

> To hope to persuade all parents who think the system unfair to choose accordingly a state education, and thereby starve the private sector of demand, is an unrealistic expectation. Many are unlikely to respond in that way when their children's interests (which they may well consider have, for them, a higher moral value) are at stake. Instead, it would be more productive to empathise with their current position and to harness the energies of all those who hold that the system itself is unfair, whatever their personal circumstances and choices. The only consequence of name-calling is the silence of many; and those may include influential opinion-formers, who could otherwise contribute effectively and creatively to finding the best ways forward.

So, even these authors fall back on 'talk' rather than action.

The pity of it is: They fail to follow the money.

In the final chapter of their book, however, after an historical account of recent developments of the extraordinary lobbying power of the private British system, the authors finally look outward. To Finland.

The current educational predicament in both the UK and Australia, and their distinction from the Finnish experience is, in fact, very simple and goes back to public funding.

In 1963, a crucial time for both Australia and the UK when the comprehensive system of State education was introduced in those countries, the private system sold its wares to insecure middle class parents. In Australia, in particular, public funding of those institutions was introduced after 80 years without their subsidisation. The UK also had a State subsidised 'maintained' school system.

This funding has effectively undermined the comprehensive integration of children in both countries and consolidated a social class system with limited social mobility and gross inequalities.

The Finnish story is otherwise. I

In 1963, at a time when the quality of education in Finland was barely at international average, the Finnish Parliament reached a decision in principle for comprehensive school reform, involving a long-term commitment to a common basic school for all and in effect the phasing out of private schools. It was illegal to charge fees.

This was duly implemented, on a basis of widespread consensus, in the 1970-s. There was considerable opposition from businessmen and right-wind politicians who from the 1970s to the 1990s forcibly argued that the new path would jeoparise the country's economic prospects by holding back the most talented . They demanded greater choice and competition.

Then, in 2001, in the first PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) Finland outperformed all other OECD countries.

In 2017 a range of international indices ranked Finland the most stable, the safest and the best governed country in the world; it was also ranked the second most socially progressive and the third wealthiest, least corrupt and most socially just. [i]

In March 2018 the UN declared Finland the happiest place to live on the planet. [ii]

DOGS Position

Since 1964, when the private schools in Australia, through constant lobbying of the Catholic church, once again opened the public Treasury for funding for their schools, the DOGS have opposed, not the existence of such schools, but their public funding. We have never deviated from this position.

In 1964, the private sector in Australia was in sharp decline and social mobility was very healthy indeed.

That funding, which started with science blocks and libraries, has since become a flood; social mobility is on a downward spiral; inequalities abound and Australia has fallen behind the International Joneses.

Finland did not make the public funding mistakes of the UK and Australia.

DOGS rest their case.

[i] Jon Henley, 'Free and fair: How Finland came up with the answers', *Guardian*, 13 February 2018; Finland' story shows equality is a better route to happiness than rapid growth', *Observer*, 18 March 2018.
[ii] Pasi Sahlberg*, Finnish Lessons: What can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland*?, Teachers College Press, New York, p. 24