

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

PRESS RELEASE 862

LOBBYLAND

Lobbyists are undermining public trust in our political institutions.

They are most prolific in Canberra. Lobby firms infest the suburbs of Barton and Kingston. It is easy walking distance to Parliament House, the National Press Club and the major departments. A real Lobbyland with the Minerals Council of Australia, the Australian Medical Association, Lockheed Martin, the Australian Pharmacy Guild, the Business Council of Australia and last but not least the Catholic Education Commission and Council for Independent Schools.

In an extraordinary article published on the John Menadue blog, Pearls and Irritations, Chris Bonner and Lyndsay Connors have outlined how the private school lobby groups have captured the ears of both major parties .It is worth reproducing in full.

But before we do, we would like to give you a blast from the past on the DOGS website.

Why? Because what Chris Bonner and Lyndsay Connors are saying is only what the DOGS have been saying for the past half century. The corruption of our democracy and its cornerstone, our public education system by lobbyists from the religious sector has been the subject of a number of submissions to various Senate Committee over this time. So we refer you to excerpts from a Submission made in 2000 by Ray Nilsen at

<http://www.adogs.info/images/pr19.htm>

1. STATE AID CORRODES THE WORKINGS OF GOVERNMENT

Massive Gains in State Aid are the result of Private Dealings between Clerics and Members or Agents of the Executive.

The following are a few examples:

- Cardinal Gilroy and Archbishop J. Carroll, meeting with Mr. R. Heffron 1962 .
- Bishop Moran and Sir Henry Bolte in 1966 before the granting of State Aid in 1967
- Mr Mick Young and Archbishop Jim Carroll, prior to the 1972 Whitlam election

- Bishop F. Carroll, Father Frank Martin, Father J. Williams and Monsignor J. Bourke and Senator Carrick, late 1970s.
- Before Hawke's ALP government was elected in 1983, prominent Canberra personality and Churchman
- In 1998 certain bishops and Mr John Howard out manoeuvred Beazley . They quietly upped the State Aid offer. This meeting and the behind the scene deals done in the last few years are largely the reason for the doubling of State Aid within 8 years.
- The late Archbishop Carroll who was the greatest of political strategists and manipulator, said, when he was asked about writing his biography replied to the effect that "no one would believe it."
- D.O.G.S. have no illusions. Their reply to Archbishop Carroll would be- "try us!"....

Bottom of the School Yard Schemes

Very early in the State Aid grab, the major beneficiary of State Aid, the Roman Catholic Church, woke up to the lamentable weakness of those who were supposed to protect the public interest. For instance, they recognized the financial benefit of keeping needy schools needy; withholding of moneys ; switching of categories of schools; and using frontier groups to set up further "needy" schools.

D.O.G.S. do not have to quote themselves in the 1970s and 1980s, but only need to point to some statements of people involved in the Schools Commission.

- **Statement of Dr. K. McKinnon:** *"It (the "needs" policy) is not illegal, just slippery...It expected everybody to play the game by the declared rules...It's like income tax- everybody maneuvers themselves to benefit in the best possible way."* (**National Times** 29 August-4 September 1982).
- **Statement of J. Kirner:** *"It isn't sufficient to say that we will give aid according to need. We know that the needs policy can be bastardized by even a group as honest as the Schools Commission"* (**Victorian Teacher** 2 April 1983 p. 13)
- **Statement of Dr. K. McKinnon :** Report of Interview 1994 in Anne O'Brien: *Blazing a Trail* at p. 141

"As chair of the Schools Commission, Dr, McKinnon was particularly concerned with the inability of some sectors of Catholic education to demonstrate their accountability in respect of commonwealth funding. He was very critical of parish priests' control over the money, and the lack of knowledge and involvement of principals in the financial matters of the schools. While he accepted the principle of financial support for non-government schools, he was not in favour of block funding, because in some catholic system, the distribution of money didn't actually ensure that the most needy schools got the most resources. He maintained that, while Victoria developed a rationale for distribution of money based on need, it was impossible for the Schools Commission to penetrate what was happening in New South Wales. "

The above statements of Dr. McKinnon and Mrs Kirner indicate the failure of both bureaucrats and politicians to look after the public interest when confronted with Churchmen.

In 2000 Hedley Beare said we have a "*Behemoth where before there was nothing substantial.*"

The bureaucrats and the politicians are now faced with an adroit and canny centralized Church administration with a lot of political nous. This would be bad enough.

However, it is worse because taxpayers do not even know how many of the politicians and bureaucrats are sympathetic to and identify first with the Church of their particular racial and tribal background.

In this circumstance the legislature should abandon any State Aid to Church Schools.

We refuse to suggest any procedures or schemes to protect the public purse. We believe that the Church Schools interests have proved themselves too skilful. Our politicians have neither the wit, nor the intestinal fortitude to confront them in the public interest. The bureaucrats – we have long since given up on them!

If the politicians roll over or run after the churchmen, why should the bureaucrats do otherwise?

And now, for the Bonner Connors article: at

<https://johnmenadue.com/how-the-lobbies-hijacked-school-education/>

Lobbyland: How the lobbies hijacked school education

By [CHRIS BONNOR](#) and [LYNDSAY CONNORS](#) | On [5 October 2020](#)

In all areas of public policy there are groups that engage in advocacy and lobbying to influence public opinion and to advance their special interests. These groups have been obvious and successful over half a century of increasingly privatised school education.

Where such groups are publicly funded and not-for-profit organisations, such as in Australia's private school sector, there is a fine line between advocacy and lobbying. The purpose of advocacy is to make the organisation's views known on particular issues, to identify problems and to argue for solutions to these in order to garner public support. The lobbying process is often less open and transparent than advocacy. Lobbying generally has a more direct and specific political purpose, involving direct contact with governments or political parties in order to influence legislation. In the case of the private school sector, attempts to influence governments take the form of lobbying rather than advocacy.

The power and influence of lobbyists in that sector has evolved over six decades in Australia, to the point where their impact on policy is probably unequalled elsewhere. While much of this lobbying is about power, influence and economic advantage, school education reaches deep into the hearts, minds and aspirations of every family. School education can be about their children, their wellbeing and their future, while more broad views of schools are about

community, society and nationhood. Such differences have created a setting for bitter, high-stakes disputes.

Labor historian Graham Freudenberg [once declared](#) that the longest, deepest, most poisonous debate in Australia has been about government aid to church schools. The grounds for conflict go well back: public education is around 150 years old, but it was established against Catholic church resistance and was always going to create a lingering sore. Catholic schools led the charge for public funding, especially in 1962 when Catholic school families in Goulburn NSW moved their children into their local public schools because the state government wouldn't financially support Catholic schools. In lobbying terms this single act was stunningly successful and is seen as the symbolic start of state aid to non-government schools. The high-fee, mainly Protestant, private schools soon joined the queue for public funding. They were the alma mater for many conservative politicians and it was no great leap for the schools to build their contacts with the Liberal and Country parties.

Both sides of politics also courted the 'Catholic vote', with school funding becoming the bargaining chip. The ALP shifted ground many times to retain this vote, and the Coalition developed a carefully constructed affinity with the Catholic schools and church hierarchy. The latter had quite a unique power: on many occasions, agreements on school funding would stand or fall depending on messages emanating from the church pulpit on the following Sunday. The power of the church became especially evident in the close relationship between Prime Minister John Howard and the Catholic Cardinal George Pell.

From the 1970s onwards, the private school peak groups became increasingly well organised advocates and effective lobbies, [with multiple roles](#). In the case of Catholic schools, apart from their links to the church, they are also the school authority and in more recent times have engaged external lobbyists as well. Both Catholic and Independent sectors have a significant number of backbenchers on both sides of politics willing to [press their case](#) in the party room. In some contrast, public schools are less well represented in the nation's parliaments. There is also an ongoing shuffle of key people between private school peak groups and politics. Ex-Labor politicians, Greg Crafter and Jacinta Collins are two examples, serving respectively as chair and executive director of the NCEC.

Both private school sectors have long enjoyed a seat around any government table where policies impacting on schools are discussed. In some contrast, those representing public schools – mainly the state governments – have been managers of, rather than advocates for, public schools. This has left the teacher unions and affiliates as the most prominent advocates and lobbyists for public schools, something which has made them an easy target for conservatives. At critical times, including in later discussions on the implementation of the Gonski recommendations, the teacher unions have been excluded.

For decades, private school peak groups and lobbies have enjoyed a 'perfect storm' of opportunity and advantage. Federally, their political allies were in power more often than not – and it was relatively easy to undermine or reverse reforms engineered by shorter-lived Labor governments. This was especially obvious following the Karmel (1973) and Gonski (2011) reviews. They were also able to fill the many policy vacuums created by three-year electoral cycles. Australian federalism has played a critical role: responsibility for public funding of public and private schools is unevenly and irrationally split between the federal and state governments. This is, in part, a product of private system lobbying and key bonus

for private schools is that they are mainly funded by the relatively cashed-up federal government.

The complexities of public funding have made the lobbying task easier... for some. State governments are less inclined to lobby the federal government for public schools. In response on such occasions the federal government can cheerfully assert that they don't run any schools and redirect the solution back to state treasuries. In some contrast, private schools can lobby for funding from anywhere; they have very little financial skin in the game.

Both governments and lobby groups engage in deliberate obfuscation. Depending on one's preferred source, school funding figures vary considerably depending on the source and the purpose in presenting them. Even public sources such as the Productivity Commission and My School don't count the money going to schools in the same way. Funding figures can be presented in very different ways: gross increases, net increases, percentage increases, funding per student – take your pick. My School data has managed to create some order out of this chaos, in the process pointing to [deliberate misrepresentation](#) in debates about schools. Other information, such as principal and teacher salaries, is still largely missing from official sources.

The activities of private school lobbies have helped keep certain issues to the political forefront, at the expense of more enduring problems. One funding issue which has resonated for decades is 'no school shall lose a dollar' – indicating that funding reform in the pursuit of equity will only get a green light if every school comes out ahead. Being the only party that has seriously attempted funding reform, Labor is the most frequent target of taunts about 'hit lists' of schools to lose funding, especially during the 2004 federal election. Despite assuming the status of [urban myth](#), the 'hit list' accusation has lingered. In effect, redistribution of overall resources between the sectors, essential if the twin goals of equity and excellence are to be achieved, is rarely on any reform agenda. To avoid creating losers, re-distribution can only be achieved through increasing total funding.

There are many examples of how this plays out. When she announced the Gonski review in April 2010 Education Minister Julia Gillard [reassured a conservative think tank](#) that no school would lose a dollar. But the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education applied the required pressure and Gillard announced a one-year extension of the existing Howard era funding. Coalition education spokesman Christopher Pyne dismissed this as a "desperate election fix", one which was later overshadowed by the Abbott/Pyne pre-election declaration of a "unity ticket" with Labor on Gonski funding.

The Coalition's antics in the period since the Gonski review reaffirmed its decades-long alliance with private school peak groups. In 2014 Pyne assured a private school peak group conference that the Coalition had an ["emotional commitment" to private schools](#). Speaking earlier to another friendly audience, Tony Abbott said that it was [in the Liberal Party's DNA](#) to fund Independent and Catholic schools. All through this period the influence of the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) and the National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) can be seen in the wording of speeches and in various submissions, including to the Gonski review. None of this diminishes the role and impact of public sector campaigns organized by the AEU; the big difference lies in the nature of the links and levels of transparency.

Recent years have seen some variation in rusted-on links and myths. In 2016-17 the Turnbull Coalition federal government advanced new school funding proposals, popularly known as Gonski 2.0. Turnbull's education minister, Simon Birmingham, admitted that many private schools were over-funded and criticised special deals in school funding. Private school groups [responded](#) by pressing the alarm bells and targeting the Coalition. In an unusual twist, itself a tribute to the lobbying power of the private sector, accusations about a [private school 'hit list'](#) came from the ALP. Additionally, the Catholic schools lobby was rewarded, as has been the habit for decades, by a pledge of an additional \$250 million from Labor.

The 'Gonski 2.0' initiative directed the angst of the Catholic lobby towards the Coalition. During a crucial by-election at the time, the Catholic lobby [made 30,000 robocalls](#) urging residents of Batman to vote for Labor. This direct intervention in politics by a tax-exempt charity raised a complaint to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. In an [early response](#) the Commissioner stated that charities have a right to advocate, but they cannot have a "purpose of promoting or opposing a political party or candidate for political office". However, it seems that the Commission is still to resolve this complaint.

For obvious reasons other priorities have dominated discussions about schools during 2020, but the structural and funding problems which have beggared school education for decades are still with us, the 'Gonski 2.0' funding changes resolved a political, rather than a school funding problem. The state/federal split in sourcing funding for schools isn't working, partly due to short electoral cycles which keep governments constantly in election mode. It is a system highly prone to cost and blame shifting and, as always, to 'special deals'. Even a cursory glance at the recent history of school education amply demonstrates the power of the lobbies and their regressive impact on even the most timid of reforms. It is in the public interest to have achieving schools, operating in an equitable framework. For years the indicators [have shown](#) that we are falling well short.

If school education is any indication, the circumstances in which lobby groups are allowed to operate, as well as how they operate, needs serious reconsideration. Education legislation and accompanying regulations in Australia are overly reflective of special deals done behind closed doors by governments and political parties with lobbyists, rather than through structures and processes that enable rational and informed debate. This works against public trust and durable consensus.

As we have done in the past, we need to encourage and enable widespread involvement in ongoing reviews of school education – and to support the conventional democratic processes which see recommendations debated and legislated. In school education this was achieved following the Karmel Review in 1973, the Hawke government review in 1984 and the Gonski Review in 2013. But once legislated, the implementation of review recommendations needs to be at arm's length of lobbyists and legislators. The Schools Commission in the 1970s and 1980s did its best work when this occurred. The National *School Resourcing* Board (2017) could potentially do the same. This has to be done in conjunction with a major review of the public service at both state and federal levels, with a focus on who they serve, how they serve and the resources they need to be free and fearless. Good policy will never emerge out of a diminished and denuded public service, and Australia will be forever poorly served if the only alternatives emanate from self-serving interest groups.

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