

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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NORTHERN IRELAND TEACHES US THE DANGERS OF SEGREGATED SCHOOLS

Should the state pay for schools that divide children on the grounds of faith?

and

Should schools that are substantially subsidised with taxpayer's money have the right to reject children on the basis of religion, parentage (ethnic background, gay couples), or ability to pay?

These are questions focussing the minds of educationists – and even politicians- in the UK.

Unfortunately it is not a question that is politically correct in Australia. There is bipartisan agreement that the 'State Aid question' has been buried.

So Australia is travelling swiftly backwards into the tribalism of Europe, dividing its children on the basis of class, creed and culture.

DOGS refer readers to developments in Northern Ireland, a province that knows a thing or two about segregated religious education and its deleterious effects. The following was reported by the Guardian Newspaper on 29 November at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/nov/29/northern-ireland-segregated-schools-peter-robinson>

The great majority of schools there are run by either Protestants or Catholics, largely because since the 1890s, the Catholics refused to send their children to State schools. Children are divided along religious lines from the age of five. Given that the religious communities also tend to live in Catholic and Protestant areas the

possibilities for the generation and maintenance of inter-communal misunderstanding and even violence are clear. This is not a matter of speculation but one of bitter experience.

But now, the Democratic Unionist leader, Peter Robinson, in a 25 November speech, called upon his party to promote integrated institutions. The extra costs of running separate institutions for Catholics and Protestants may have helped to focus minds given current constraints. However, it is clear that there is more to it than this.

It is especially important that a leading Northern Irish politician is discussing the need for more integrated institutions. It is high time for the matter of the immense potential harm of separating children into different schools on the basis of their parents' religion to move up the political agenda. The opening of a debate in Northern Ireland contrasts with the situation in mainland Britain where leading politicians are all committed not only to keeping our existing faith schools but also to making more of them.

In a speech on 16 October Robinson to his former council in Castlereagh, Robinson said:

"We cannot hope to move beyond our present community divisions while our young people are educated separately ... I believe that future generations will scarcely believe that such division and separation was common for so long. The reality is that our education system is a benign form of apartheid, which is fundamentally damaging to our society. Who among us would think it acceptable that a state or nation would educate its young people by the criteria of race with white schools or black schools? Yet we are prepared to operate a system which separates our children almost entirely on the basis of their religion. As a society and administration we are not mere onlookers of this; we are participants and continue to fund schools on this basis. And then we are surprised that we continue to have a divided society."

Churches should be free to run their own schools, Robinson said, but not on the basis of state funding. Meanwhile, in mainland UK, and now in Australia, we have to wonder where the leading politicians are who are prepared to speak so frankly about the consequences of the state funding of sectarian schools.

In the UK the Minister for Education, Michael Gove is encouraging faith schools to seek academy status to avoid 'meddling by secularists'. As in Australia, all the main political parties support faith schools and will accept or encourage more of them.

The defenders of faith schools in both the UK and Australia claim that placing children in separate religious institutions for their school years does not foster sectarian attitudes.

However, as our public systems in Australia have proved, nothing can replace what is learned by rubbing shoulders and getting along with others from diverse backgrounds on a daily basis.

In his book [Identity and Violence](#), Amartya Sen warns over and over again about the dangers of encouraging people to think of themselves in terms of an overriding single identity. He says:

"The state policy of actively promoting faith schools freshly devised for Muslim, Hindu and Sikh children (in addition to pre-existing Christian ones) ... is not only educationally problematic, it encourages a fragmentary perception of the demands of living in a desegregated Britain. Many of these institutions are coming up precisely at a time when religious prioritisation has been a major source of violence in the world (adding to the history of such violence in Britain itself, including Catholic-Protestant divisions in Northern Ireland) ... The important goal is not some formulaic 'parity' in relation to old Brits with their old faith schools but what would best enhance the capability of the children to live 'examined lives' as they grow up in an integrated country

DOGS congratulate Robinson for having the foresight to look at the dangers of segregated schooling? When will Australian politicians have the courage to speak out and take on the religious institutions, before we go further down this path?

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