

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 463

KEEPING UP WITH THE INTERNATIONAL JONESES

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The Gonski Report slipped in and out of view during the Gillard/ Rudd dramatics. Its findings exposed the shameful fact that a growing number of Australian children are in increasingly residualised public systems because of the way schools are funded. Presented with a \$5 billion educational price tag, the Prime Minister muttered something about the priority of a surplus. Her Minister for Education, Peter Garrett made positive, if vacuous noises.

The Report's recommends a base level of funding for all Australian students – a voucher system by another name— and a new “no losers” guarantee which writes the Howard Government's guarantee into the funding bottom line and indexes it into the future. Since the policy of ‘parental choice’ reigns supreme, the disadvantaged majority in public schools may only receive a few crumbs after the private sector lobby has been paid off. This has been the pattern for the last 40 years, so Gonski promises more of the same.

If Australia is egalitarian why do some parents of schoolchildren feel the pressure to ‘keep up with the Jones’ in wealthy religious schools? Evidence uncovered by the Gonski Report on the Funding of Education in Australia indicates a society led backwards by those ‘keeping up with the Joneses. Frank Sal, in ‘Class Envy Belongs to the Middle Ages’ *The Age* 30.01.2012 ‘wrote:

I wonder how we differ from the Middle Ages, when the rich and the church maintained privileged positions on the back of the poor and of the aspirant middle class - the shopkeepers who worked hard to try to get accepted into the rarefied atmosphere and opportunities of the well-to-do...

By keeping our eyes fixed on the schools for the wealthy and powerful however, Australia has fallen behind the international Joneses.

On OECD figures Australia has dropped back in the International race.

<http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/PISA-2009-Report.pdf> In 2009 for example, in mathematical literacy, Australia fell behind twelve countries : Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei, Finland Leichenstein, Switzerland, Japan, Canada, The Netherlands and Macao. An OECD report entitled [Equity and Quality in Education – Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools](#), highlights the need for an overhaul of school funding arrangements in Australia and a far greater investment in public education. It also warns of the dangers of competitive school markets saying they led to greater segregation of students and had severe effects of education outcomes

Gonski is aware of the international Jones. He says: *The race is on, and Australia is losing ground.* (*Age*, 21.02. 2012.) He is joined by a muted chorus. *We risk being regional dunce*, writes Greg Earl in *Asia-Pacific observed.* (*AFR* 23.02.2012).

Gonski is long on the egalitarian rhetoric:

Australia must aspire to have a schooling system that is among the best in the world for its quality and equity, and must prioritise support for its lowest performing students. Every child should have access to the best possible education, regardless of where they live, the income of their family or the school they attend. [p. xiv]

Confronted with declining quality and glaring inequities between the private and public systems, Gonski recommends that Australia needs to spend an additional \$5 billion a year on schools, predominantly public schools, because they have a much higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

But, given the requirements of his political masters, the recommendations of the Gonski report also ensure that private school Jones be paid off before any crumbs fall to the impoverished public school neighbours.

The taxpayer dependent sector are happy to accept Gonski's recognition of parents demanding 'choice and diversity' in education and the additional largesse implied in the Gonski voucher model. (*The Australian* 29.02.2012 p. 5)

The Federal government is fearful of a lobby intent on keeping up with the wealthy Jones. Our craven politicians are even more fearful of the religious leaders behind this lobby—but it is impolite to mention the unholy Protestant/Catholic Alliance of 1973 or entanglement of religion with the State in educational circles.

Those concerned with the national, public good as distinct from private preferences might ponder, however, not just the international situation but Australia's own history. The independent sector was independent of taxpayer funding in the period 1872 to 1964 and we had healthy public and independent systems. If the wealthy Jones didn't want their children to mix with the plebs in those years, they paid for it. Their schools were rarely superior to those in the public sector.

The idea of educating all Australian children in order to keep up with the International Joneses heralded the involvement of the Australian States in secondary education at the turn of the twentieth century. And, further back in time, the desire to provide an elementary education for every child in the colony led to the involvement of the State in elementary education in 1848. If he is serious about keeping Australia in the international race, Gonski might do well to read the Report of the New South Wales Select Committee of 1844, and the recommendations of those who first introduced a national, or public system:

The first great objection to the denominational system, is its expense; the number of schools in a given locality ought to depend on the number of children requiring instruction which that locality contains. To admit any other principle is to depart from those maxims of wholesome economy, upon which public money should always be administered.

It appears to your Committee impossible not to see, that the very essence of a denominational system, is to leave the majority uneducated, in order thoroughly to imbue the minority with peculiar tenets.

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