

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 465

PUBLIC SCHOOL AUTONOMY:

PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

March 16 2012

Public schools are being cut asunder from the central administration and left to fend for themselves for the very worst of reasons. 'Autonomy' rhetoric belongs with privatisation, not the public good.

State bureaucracies established in the nineteenth century were centralized for good reasons.

They were centralised because:

1. Local parents established schools but refused to become local tax collectors. They wanted the government to pay for school maintenance and teacher salaries. (evidence of this is found in the C19 documents, particularly in those dealing with schools in the Riverina and the cities of Melbourne and Sydney. Also see articles by Jean Ely in the *Melbourne Studies in Education* of the 1970s)
2. Representatives in the C19 State Parliaments were determined to have accountability for every penny of public money spent on schools. They wanted efficiency and economy. Only a centralized bureaucracy which could provide accountability for public money. The public system set up the centralized bureaucracy before the Catholic church did and the democratic politicians favoured the public system.
3. Representatives in the C19 Parliaments could not control denominational (sectarian) schools or gain accountability for expenditure of public money, teacher quality or the curriculum. The

denominational schools duplicated both State and denominational facilities. Then as now, they were inefficient, expensive and socially divisive. State Aid was accordingly withdrawn.

4. In the 1950s Australian public school systems were lauded by educators like Freeman Butts who recognized that the centralized public systems were able to equalize educational opportunities, particularly in the rural and disadvantaged areas of Australia. Every Australian child was guaranteed an education.

Since the 1960s, with the advent of State Aid to sectarian schools (euphemistically called 'independent' schools), the clock has been turned back. In 2012 we have a country where 66% of the children have been disadvantaged in favour of those determined to obtain the first class ticket to heaven and the good job for their children. The rhetoric of 'choice' in funding debates has been backed up by concerted attacks on the public education administration. They have been taken over in many cases, on top, by sectarian school supporters. This is particularly obvious in the Victorian public education system with Minister, Martin Dixon and his public service advisors. Accompanying the rhetoric of 'choice' has been a concerted attack on the centralized 'public' school systems. Romancing about 'independent' autonomous schools which can hire and fire their own teachers – and pupils accompanies the free market ideology. In this context, no mention is ever made of the highly centralized Catholic system and lobby groups.

If Australians do not remember their history the future of public education will dry up. The Victorian experience of decentralization and autonomy for public schools (Schools of the Future!) in the years 1990 -1910 is a sad and sorry one. It has led to:

1. The picking off of isolated schools when their enrolments drop - even if these schools are the only public schools in their area. Apparently the mantra of 'choice' does not stretch to a public school education.
2. The selling off of public property to sectarian schools (e.g. Coburg and other areas)and/ or residential developers. Governments conveniently

forget that residences have families that require educational infrastructure.

3. Responsibility for shortfalls in funding pushed down to the school level. Parents are forced, as in the early nineteenth century, to become local tax-collectors.
4. The promotion of God Principals who are 'managers' rather than educators.
5. The naming and blaming of schools and teachers.
6. The forcing of contract employment and insecurity on teachers and the withdrawal of meaningful, educational, career structures.

Even educators like Chris Bonnor have been hoodwinked by forty years of 'decentralisation' rhetoric. Yet he is 'uneasy' about autonomy. He has every reason to be.

The centralized bureaucracies with their committed employees and career structures for successful teachers were the bulwark that protected our public systems.

DOGS believe that it is time that public school supporters pulled the pin on meaningless 'autonomy' rhetoric and did their history.

DOGS believe that it is time that public school supporters, particularly those in Victoria, re-asserted their right to an administration of Ministers and bureaucrats committed in word and deed to a public system.

LISTEN TO

THE DOGS RADIO PROGRAM

3CR

855 ON THE AM DIAL

12.00 NOON SATURDAYS