

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

## **PRESS RELEASE 472**

### **RELIGIOUS SCHOOL INTERESTS RIDE HIGH: OVERT ATTACK ON FREE UNIVERSAL PUBLIC EDUCATION**

**13 May 2012**

**Gillard has ignored both the Gonski Report and the pleas of public school supporters for money for disadvantaged students.**

**The religious school lobby is now so sure of itself that it is openly attacking the concept of free, secular and universal education, demanding that it be privatised with a user-pay system.**

Tim Hawkes, Principal of The Kings School, proposes such a system . He has long claimed that the middle class who choose to send their children to government schools should also pay extra for

doing so.(*Sydney Morning Herald* May 10, 2012). He writes:

We need to find a new source of funding.

In order to decide where some of this extra money might come from, it is useful to return to basic principles. Those that pay should be those that use. In this case, it is the parents who have a child in an Australian school. Any school.

Expostulations about education needing to be free are now inappropriate. Our education is not free and has never been. Someone always pays.

The presumption of free medical cover was removed with the introduction of the Medicare Levy by the Fraser government in 1976. The presumption of free education must also be removed.

To propose a further tax is fraught, but it is time for an Educare levy on the parents of school students, particularly on those who are better off. More than 60 of the 100 wealthiest school communities, as shown on the 2009 My School website, were state schools. Most children in selective schools are from higher-earning families.

Notwithstanding this week's Robin Hood budget, richer parents should pay more towards schooling of their children. Poorer parents should pay nothing.

The Educare levy should be paid by parents, irrespective of whether they send their children to a state, Catholic or independent school. The fee would be paid per child and be payable only when a family had a child at an Australian school. Australian taxpayers begrudge paying any tax, but if there is sympathy for anything soaking up their taxpayer dollars, it is education.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/the-money-for-schools-must-come-from-parents-20120509-1ycxq.html#ixzz1uRwHODJT>

He has been followed by both Gerard Henderson, Director of the Sydney Institute, (SMH, "*Well off get a free ride from tax payer for children's education*," 20 March 2012) and emeritus professor Don

Watts, the former Vice chancellor of both Curtin and Bond universities (Education Review March 2012) have joined the chorus.

DOGS could write pages on why a democracy such as Australia should have a strong public school system, but have discovered that Margaret Clark, has done a great job in Online Opinion, posted 3 May 2012. We quote:

Education in the compulsory years is set up to be exactly that – compulsory – the democratic right of every child. In fact it is one of the few services provided by Government that is defined as compulsory regardless of circumstances. In a recent speech to the Sydney Institute, Minister Garrett makes a similar point 'School education is unique in public policy terms because it reaches into every household in a way that is manifestly different from other forms of Government'

It is compulsory because the people, through their Government, commit to the goal of universal quality education, not just as an individual market good, but as an essential social or public good – in the public interest. This is because the benefits of education to each individual aggregate to strengthen communities, the polity and workplaces. That is to say the universal provision of a comprehensive, sequenced, quality exposure to knowledge, understandings, values and experiences is provided in order equip all future citizens, workers, parents, and community members to contribute to our social democracy and our economy.

As early as 1869 Henry Parkes articulated this vision

*...We are endeavouring to supply the means of sound instruction to those who, in a very few years, are to constitute the strength of the country...a Public school system in any country is an essential part of its institutions in the large sense of government politics. It is part of the policy of the country. It is part of the intention and action of the Government; part of the very life of constituted authority. He went on to say that, Whatever may be our form of Government ... Let us by every means in our power take care that the children of the country grow up under such a sound and enlightened system of instruction, that they will consider the dearest of all possessions the free exercise of their own judgment in the secular affairs of life, and that each man will shrink from being subservient to any other man or earthly power.*

My father was a passionate educator and so I imbibed this understanding – in a way that I often take for granted. But I do think it is widely accepted. This is why, at first, I did not think this middle class fee proposal merited a response. I assumed that it would be dismissed by most and I also assessed that implementing it would be very tricky. Would Australians stand idly by when families who refused to pay the fees are penalised? How can you make individual parents pay for something that they are required to have and that is in everyone's interest? The reality is that all taxpayers benefit from a good school system not just individual parents.

But I am now convinced that responding to this sort of talk matters- it demands a robust critique.

It matters because pushing well-off families out of the public sector would lead to higher concentrations of disadvantage in government schools and we already know that schools with high concentration of the poor do worse even when controlling for the effect of the individual student demographics. And remember that this could be the impact even if the Government did not try and implement the policy. It would just require this idea to become part of the populist rhetoric.

It matters because, any further movement of the middle class out of the public system could lead to reduced government expenditure and reduced services in government schools because of the loss of articulate voices in support of public education.

It matters because, if schooling comes to be seen solely as a private good, we are really looking at a very grim social vision – a pre industrial vision. A vision that is incompatible with the whole enterprise of Australian nationhood. It matters because this kind of thinking takes us even further down the neoliberal market model of schooling.

We are already global outliers in this respect. For there would be almost no other comparably developed country in the world where this statement would be considered as anything but extreme neoconservative babble – even in the US. Our funding regime for Government and non-Government schools is highly irregular in global terms. Australia sits around the middle of OECD countries ranked in terms of per capita investment in schooling. But this obscures the bifurcated elements of the funding relative to other countries. Our

funding to Government schools is very near the bottom, at third lowest. But our funding to the non-Government system is near the top of the list, at fourth highest. But this uniqueness is not apparent to most of us – our set up is the water we swim in.

This has led to some confused understandings. For example, the idea that the Government and non-Government systems are just different streams of the same set up is widespread. Schools are part of markets and you can choose A or B.

However, they are not separate but equal because the Government schools system is available and open to all comers – it is the default system. Garrett makes this clear in the Sydney Institute speech "*Government schools provide access for all students irrespective of personal circumstance and remain the backbone of our education system. They educate the majority of Australian students and do most of the heavy lifting.*" When Lyndsay Connors delivered the 2010 Henry Parkes Oration she used a biological metaphor to describe the nature of the public system (in the context of universal, compulsory schooling) as the 'host organism'. This was because, she argued, public schools do not require the existence of private schools to be able to operate; whereas, non-government schooling, as currently constituted in Australia, is only viable because of the existence of the public schools that are open to all and, in this sense, it exists in a parasitical relationship with the host. This analogy was not used to make a moral point but to make the important and unassailable argument that the future health of the public school system is the key to the health of the school system as a whole.

There are also those who do see the two systems as separate but not equal and this slides into seeing the Government system as the social safety net for all who cannot afford to, or won't make the 'quality choice'. Henderson implies this when he castigates journalists for failing to apply their middle class welfare critique to schools. Needless to say those who see the schooling system in this way would not expect the social safety net 'product' to be funded to deliver a high quality education – adequate is the term I have often heard used.

It matters because we have already seen how this kind of market-based justification can be used to undermine an important government service. Many readers will remember that during the Howard years we were exhorted to be responsible citizens and to purchase private health cover. To persuade us to 'make this choice' the Government implemented an age based penalty system for everyone over the age of 30 who did not have private health cover.

Now to my shame and puzzlement I complied – out of fear I suspect. Nobody wants to find himself or herself at the mercy of an uncaring system as one ages. But in part my compliance was a response to a very loud silence – there was very little in the way of protest against this new policy direction. You see the justification for this policy was, 'if you can afford it, you should not impose yourself on the public system, because these services can't cope. You should use the non-public system or pay extra'.

This sort of logic, if it not interrogated, sounds intuitively sensible. But it ignores so much. There SHOULD have been outrage in response to this because it stripped away the fundamentals of the hard fought for National Universal Healthcare System. And yet when, in the 70s, the LNP made its first attempt to undermine the National Healthcare System there was a general strike and the Government had to cave in. So what happened between 1976 and 1996?

I don't have an easy answer to this, but I do believe that in the 90s we lost a sense of something that is very important. We are not a bunch of individuals connected to each other only through the market and differentiated from each other only by our differentiated capacity to pay.

We need to respond vigorously to this kind of talk and to hold our Commonwealth government to account for staying true to the legacy of our founders by ensuring that in all its dealings with schooling, the primary obligation of the Commonwealth is to maintain and safeguard strong and socially representative public school systems that are of the highest standard and are open, without fees or religious tests, to all children and young people.

Henderson rails about the fact that the concept of free education is so ingrained in the Australian national psyche that it is rarely, if ever, challenged. I celebrate it and will continue to defend it. For as Garrett says, 'if we are to have a productive, prosperous and sustainable future, it will be built on the capacity of our people'. And a nation's capacity building starts with schooling. (See <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=13574> )

DOGS thank Margaret Clark for her well argued defence of public education.

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