

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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The Power of the Private School Vote: Debunking the Myth

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Private School Interest groups have a habit of setting up a State Aid auction with both political parties, then backing the winner –immediately before an election.

This has spawned various myths about the power of the private school vote.

It all started with the DLP and the Goulburn strike in the early 1960s. The Catholic schools were closed. They could have and were being absorbed into the public schools in Goulbourn, but no-one wanted to admit this to be the case.

The Catholic schools cried poor, Australians felt compassion, the Needs policy was born, and the Protestant schools cashed in.

Now, it is the public systems that are genuinely poor. Australians still demonstrate concern, if not compassion.

The most recent myth is the reason behind Latham's loss of the 2004 election. This myth is currently leading Gillard and Garrett into making extraordinary promises to the private school lobby.

A Private School 'Hit List' would be an Electoral Plus

In 2012/13, the Labor Party should wise up, not only to what REALLY happened in the 2004 election, but to the educational horse they should be backing.

The tide is turning – against the noisy, greedy, outrageous private school lobby.

The Labor Party have spent fifty years running after the Catholic vote . This has long gone to the Coalition and Abbott and Pyne are their recognised champions.

If they want to win the next election, the Labor Party should look in the opposite direction. If they want to claw back votes from their natural constituency and win the election they should go for the **PUBLIC SCHOOL VOTE**.

The Facts About the 2004 Election.

Latham lost the election in Tasmania when he alienated the timber workers union. His educational policy was, if anything, an electoral plus.

Peter Brown, presented the hard proof of the wisdom of Latham's educational policy in the August 25 edition of the *Canberra Times* as follows:

Latham's 'hit list' on school funding was an electoral plus

Why did Labor lose the 2004 election? Listening to the discussion of private school funding over the past few days you'd think the blame lies with Mark Latham's notorious "hit list" - his plan to increase funding for poorer schools by reducing support for the wealthiest private schools. This week *Age* columnist Shaun Carney described the impact of that policy as a "searing" experience for Labor; a *Daily Telegraph* editorial called it a "disaster" for the party. Julia Gillard seems to agree - she has been anxious to reassure the wealthiest private schools that her government won't take away a dollar of their funding.

But how did voters in 2004 see the issue? Just before Christmas 2003, Newspoll asked 1200 adults to say what they would "like" or "not like" to happen in 2004. Fifty-five per cent of respondents said they would like to see "a reduction in government subsidies for private schools". Thirty-five per cent opposed such a move and 10 per cent were uncommitted. In other words, only a little over a third of respondents felt strongly enough to oppose

what would later become Labor's education policy for the election.

Of course, people's views can change once a political debate heats up. Latham announced the school funding policy on September 15, 3½ weeks before election day. The plan provoked a furore, particularly on talkback radio. The prime minister, John Howard, characterised it as "old-fashioned class warfare", a phrase that appeared repeatedly - along with "hit list" - in media coverage over subsequent days and weeks. The churches "savaged" Latham (according to a headline in *The Australian*), and the private schools warned of fee hikes and an exodus back to government schools. Robert Manne described the announcement as "dubious politics". Andrew Bolt described it "abhorrent".

Ten days later, though, an ACNielsen survey of just over 1400 voters found that support for a shift in funding had actually risen since the Newspoll survey 10 months earlier.

Fully 66 per cent of respondents approved of Labor's policy, with 27 per cent disapproving and the remainder uncommitted. Even among Coalition

voters, the policy attracted support from 47 per cent of respondents, with 44 per cent opposed. Given that some schools and parents had an interest in energetically resisting the plan, it isn't surprising that opinion among talkback radio callers (probably reflected in phone calls and letters to MPs) was almost exactly the reverse.

Those are the only two polls from that period that asked specifically about education funding. Most pollsters, especially as the election drew closer, were preoccupied with overall voting intentions. Labor dropped the school funding policy after the election and since then the major polls have not posed the question in the way that Newspoll and ACNielsen did in 2003-04.

So what really went wrong for Labor in 2004? In an article published in the *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Murray Goot and Ian Watson analysed the results of the Australian Election Study, a survey of 1769 voters who completed a detailed questionnaire after the election. They concluded that while Labor had a clear advantage in relation to health, education and the environment during the campaign, that edge was overwhelmed by the Coalition's strength on interest rates in particular.

Labor's biggest mistake during the campaign was to wait for far too long to respond to the Liberal Party's relentless,

visually sophisticated and misleading comparison of interest rates under recent Labor and Coalition governments, which it promoted through an intense campaign of direct mail and print and broadcast ads. After the election, calculations by economics writers at *The Age* and *The Australian* showed a strong correlation between the proportion of mortgagee households in any given electorate and the swing to the Coalition.

If Labor was seared by its schools policy in 2004, it looks like the discomfort was based on a misunderstanding of why it lost the election.

Regardless of the merits of the school funding policy, the evidence strongly suggests that it was an electoral plus for the party.

We'll find out in a few weeks whether the same misunderstanding of public attitudes influences the government's response to the Gonski report.

Peter Browne is editor of Inside Story (inside.org.au).

Read more:

<http://www.canberratimes.com.au/opinion/lathams-hit-list-on-school-funding-was-an-electoral-plus-20120824-24rpj.html#ixzz24z5bjX5W>

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