

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 675#

PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION : A LITANY OF FAILURES:

A Talk Delivered to PIBCI (Public Interests Before Corporate Interests)

2 October 2016

Preliminary Remarks ‘

Back in the day – Whitlam’s day – the claim was made that the State Aid issue was dead.

Tell that to Mr Birmingham after he was forced by Tony Jones to admit on Q&A on 26/09/16 that some private schools were 'over-funded'. But that is not the most interesting news for those who watch the privatisation ideologues and hedge funds wandering the world for profiteering on the back of public facilities. The problems of the GFC of 2008 were papered over. The derivatives never went away.

No, the most interesting news is semi-buried on page 36 of *Financial Review* of 30/9/16 namely: the rumour that the hedge funds are circling a cornerstone of the cannibalistic capitalist system – Deutsche Bank.

We must ask a vry basic question of corporations and rent seekers seeking to privatise our public education enterprises.

What will happen to our children if they fail? – as they have always done.

The results are on the Board. Privatisation of basic public services has been tried –in both the past centuries and in recent years. It has failed... dismally.

- The privatisation of TAFE is a multi-billion scandal.
- Some private schools like Acacia College Mernda proved a financial disaste
- for the Uniting church.

- The census debacle was a national embarrassment. Are we even secure from attack now government IT is contracted out?
- SA suffered an energy catastrophe. As SA got lost in darkness, Turnbull blames alternative energy for infrastructure failures and rising costs. He can fool some people, but not us. Energy was privatised in recent decades to the tune of neoliberal ideology. Frydenburg should resign if Ministerial responsibility means anything.
- Private corporations are about profit, not proper provision

We are here to discuss attempts to privatise education in the last half century. This privatisation exercise has also failed – dismally. Along with Health, its failure is the most worrying. It threatens to undermine our public education system and with it the very democratic, legal, economic and social fabric of our society.

In spite of a litany of failures, the private market ideology is still laid up in heaven. And Turnbull has directed the Productivity Commission to conduct an inquiry into how to further privatise our public services, without looking at whether handing over control of our services to corporations is in the best interests of all Australians. When will they ever learn?

SO This is an important meeting, and I am very proud to have been asked to address you.

WHO ARE THE DOGS?

The DOGS have been fighting for public education for half a century. And unlike many in this area we have been prepared to tackle the private sector head on. We are not sector blind. We know all about the opposition. This is because we also fight for separation of religion from the State.

I want tell you stories- going back and back into our Enlightenment history. For there is much we can learn and much that can be done. Robert is younger and he will discuss facts and figures.

The DOGS had first been established in Victoria in 1964 and was set up officially in 1967 by a group of State school organisations (VICCSO) and secularists, rationalists and Christian people who believed in separation of religion from the State. They were aware of the

bloodletting of the wars of religion – which are still with us – and the Enlightenment solution to the bloodletting problem in the First Amendment of the American Constitution . Our own Section 116 is based on the American First Amendment. They realised that a free, secular and universal public education system underpinned a healthy democracy. They believed that children, whatever their background, learn to live together at school. To talk about religion and education is to talk about snakes in Ireland – although it has put a lot of metaphorical snakes into that poor country.

DOGS have always believed that genuine multiculturalism can only succeed by putting children in the same public school playground. The DOGS were and are children of the C18 Enlightenment.

In the 1960s DOGS predicted that public funding of private religious schools would lead to the undermining of public education and an eventual return to the bad old days of the pre-French revolution – namely, the privatisation of education; the advantage of the few at the expense of the many; religious discord; and the view that education for the poor is a charity, not a RIGHT.

In 1968 the NSW public teachers went on strike - not for more pay – but to expose the state of our disadvantaged children and schools. I was among them. In 1969 Menzies not only gave private schools libraries and science blocks but direct Aid. We set up the NSW DOGS and had a lot of fun protesting outside wealthy schools with the pools.

I was a working mother with two babies in a flat. I had a personal, vested interest in the future of public education.

DOGS entered politics in an attempt to neutralise the DLP vote (remember the ALP split?) and in most cases equalled and exceeded that vote. In 1973 Whitlam made peace with the DLP and bought out the Protestant schools with State Aid. There is still a belief that the wealthy schools of whatever denomination need to be paid out before a cent can reach disadvantaged children. But Whitlam invented the ‘Needs’ policy and said that the State Aid problem was dead.

It did not take long for this 'Needs' policy to become a 'Greeds' policy. There never has, never will and never can be a genuine "Needs" policy while private schools receive public funding.

DOGS realised from the beginning that the Whitlam policy was a fig leaf for enrichment of the wealthy. It was rorted before the Schools Commission even commenced. Over the decades DOGS put full page advertisements in the paper attempting to expose this.

DOGS also attempted to mount a High Court case testing Section 116 of the Australian Constitution. But it took 15 years and a lot of skulduggery on the part of the religious interests to actually get to court. It would never have got off the ground if it had not been for the persistence of the Victorian DOGS, and their President, Ray Nilsen.

This long sad story is contained in the book *Contempt of Court* available from Arena Publishers 4 Kerr Street Fitzroy or 3CR. The result of the DOGS High Court case is that we proved the point. State Aid to religious schools is bad for the democratic State, bad for religion, undermines the Rule of Law, and is disastrous for public education. Meanwhile, the Lionel Murphy dissent is there, a blast from the past for the present – and the future.

When the time is ripe, Australia will need to think deeply again about building up that wall of separation between religion and the State. The rationalists and secularists in Sydney and Queensland are currently working on this with the Chaplaincy in school cases.

We have been involved in many battles over the last decades, we have been called all the names under the sun, especially by members of the old DLP and by insecure parents, but we have always held the line. A good public education system – and thanks to dedicated teachers, principals and parents – we still have one - is the cornerstone of an enlightened democracy.

Fifty years ago Public funding to private schools introduced the camel into the tent. The camel is now in danger of taking over the tent. We are looking at privatisation of the public system in this country.

All our predictions have come true. We are in no way happy to have be proved right. So we are here to say – It is late, but it is NEVER too late to fight for public education as a right for our children and our children’s children.

We believe that the prognosis for public education is far from hopeless. For me, History is about ideas, and contrary to rumours to the contrary, History is still the Story of Liberty (B. Croce)

As the middle class of Australia - as in America and Britain and parts of Europe - is being hollowed out by globalisation and public services are being sold off to multinationals and hedge funds in desperate need of more and more profits, a generation of new parents and teachers is being politicised. The arguments, the statistics, the political games are more nuanced perhaps, but think tanks and interest groups are battling it out in a very interesting manner. Here in Victoria the enrolment projections are startling and grass roots parnts groups are growing like mushrooms in spring.

A tipping point has been reached in the State Aid debate.

An extra 220 public schools are needed in Victoria alone if students are going to have a genuine choice, the right to a first class public education.

And the private schools are now costing the taxpayers more, in some cases, than public schools. Robert will deal further with this. But I will here quote Trevor Cobbold of Save Our Schools:

My School (website) enables us to compare schools enrolling similar students.

Most Australian schools fall into the 950–1150 ICSEA range.

In this ICSEA range, governments fund Catholic schools at between 90.8 per cent and 99.5 per cent of the dollars going to public schools. The figures for Independent schools range from 79.5 per cent to 94.6 per cent. Catholic schools in Queensland in this range get 94.2 per cent of government school public funding, NSW schools 96.9 per cent and Victorian schools 107.7 per cent. The corresponding figures for Independent schools are Queensland 84.5 per cent, NSW 91.0 per cent and Victoria 105.1 per cent.

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (**ICSEA**) is a measure that enables meaningful comparisons to be made across schools. It has been developed specifically for the My School website and measures key factors that correlate with educational outcomes.

Private schools also duplicate, triplicate and quadruplicate public school facilities. They are NOT economic, they are NOT independent, and they are costing taxpayers and the society far too much.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Simple !

We should do what our nineteenth century forebears did. They took over religious schools and rationalised them. It has happened once, it can happen again.

We pay for them. We should be able to use, control, own and rationalise them. In other words, they should be public schools – public in purpose, outcome, access, ownership, control and funding. And our government should accept full responsibility for provision of this service.

Impossible? Politically naïve you say ?

No, I say anything is possible, and in any case, all this has happened before – in the nineteenth century. It has also happened in France, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries like Finland and China.

Those who do not know their history are often doomed to repeat it so I would like to take you back to our earlier history. Because our predecessors in this country were confronted by similar problems to our own – and they solved them.

Australians have always been proud of our public institutions. It was our inheritance from our nineteenth century political convicts from the time of the French Revolution and the United Irish rebels - and later, chartists, as well as German and Irish religious refugees - who came to the new World, away from the class ridden societies of the old world. They made it a better place for all except of course, the indigenous people.

By 1900 Australia had implemented what one traveller described as ‘socialism without doctrine’ and led the world, particularly in educational achievements. How did they do this?

Firstly, after many battles, promoters of public education – in those days it was called ‘National’ education - successfully opposed the privatisation of education, first by an established church, and later by withdrawing State aid from ALL religions and all religious schools. Privatisation was tried in the nineteenth century and failed to educate ALL the children – miserably.

But, the private religious schools never went away. They sold their wares to a clientele wanting the first class ticket to heaven and the good job, As they have done for centuries, they taught children of would be aristocrats that they were still are born-to-rule, promising old boy networks and jobs for the boys.

One should not blame private schools for failing to do what they never intended or aspired to do. But one should call them out for what they are – institutions that are the cornerstone of an established religion and an elitist, incompetent, oligarchy.

Secondly, in the nineteenth century, supporters of public education. established strong, centralised administrations that

- Built and maintained schools
- Trained teachers
- Inspected teachers
- And provided resources and curricula to ALL schools (wherever they might be)

Privatisation has meant the taking over and running down of centralised administrations by private school interests.

Thirdly supporters of public education, Founding fathers like Inglis Clark , the Attorney General from Hobart, and later Henry Bournes Higgins introduced Section 116 into the Constitution, - the ‘ freedom of religion section’. Any reading of the Parliamentary debates of the Constitutional Convention of 1898 will indicate that the Founding fathers considered State Aid to religion and religious schools prevented by this clause. But in 1981 our High Court refused to look at the intention of the members of the Constitutional Convention or the debates, and the majority – with the notable exception of Justice Lionel Murphy, read this section down and out of our Constitution

Fourthly, in the nineteenth century supporters of public education won the common sense arguments in favour of public education. They argued that only public education

- was free, secular and compulsory (I will add universal)
- could educate ALL the nation's children because it was the only one open to all children and offensive to none - whatever their class, creed, or geographical position;
- could be accountable for expenditure of public money
- could be efficient and effective because it would not duplicate facilities –as the denominational or religious system did and still does-
- would mitigate divisions of class, colour, and creed by bringing children together.

In the last decades we have fallen behind many other countries in the world - hurtling back to the eighteenth century. Consider the above conditions for the initial success for public education and look at what has happened.

- Public education is becoming less and less free – ask any parent about ‘voluntary’ fees; it is doubtful if it can be called secular. Statistics on truancy, suspension, and expulsion are troubling.
- There is now preferential funding treatment for the private sector, the contracting out of not only our primary and secondary but the TAFE sector to both so-called non-profit and profiteering corporations; the running down and inadequate resourcing of our public sector; And the prevailing rhetoric that ‘Private is better than public’ – or ‘Private schooling is in our DNA’.
- The centralised administrations have been taken over by what I call ‘managerials’; gutted of any public education expertise, (career structures for public school educators generally finish at the level of principal); and filled with private school sympathisers, some of whom have proved in the Victorian administration, to be downright fraudulent – criminals in fact.
- Up to 350 public schools have been closed since the 1980s and sold to private religious schools or developers. Some are still there, abandoned and vandalised. A very interesting website <http://learningfromthepast.com.au/lost-schools-of-the-1990s/> is dedicated to listing and telling the history of these schools. ‘Lest we forget’. It also lists the schools that are standing empty, owned by developers.

- The 20 odd new schools promised in Victoria (Between 200 and 300 are needed due to a baby boom) are being built with public/private partnerships. Many ‘share’ public facilities with private schools.
- Departmental Teacher training institutions have been closed and in Melbourne teacher training is dominated by the Catholic University in
- There is no inspectorate and limited career structures for teachers.
- Curricula authorities are well represented by the private sector and attempts have been made to re-introduce religious classes.

Many public school supporters have been like the proverbial frog in water that is being slowly heated. It has taken 50 years, but we are now, I suggest in the end game. We can still say: Wrong Way- Go Back!

But, why have we got to this point?

I suggest that we have either forgotten or been persuaded to forget the hard learned lessons of our predecessors in this battle – for make no mistake it is a battle.

Our public education system is only 150 years old and it is up against the forces of oligarchy or elites , multinational religious organisations, and corporations that have been accumulating wealth and playing power games for millennia. The DOGS, and particularly Presidents like Ray Nilsen, have never had any illusions about this, and we have always been independent of any other groups – But the DOGS have seen, again and again, academics, teacher organisations, parent organisations and leaders selling out to promises of funding; position; status; the chimera of real power; devolution; amalgamation and the fear of vilification. If, once in the system, representatives wrote a dissenting report, they were moved on.

It takes very peculiar people to resist such temptations and in any case, in retrospect, I think it is almost cruel to put parents, teachers and ordinary citizens up against powerful institutions like the Roman Catholic Church and policy members of the Institute of Public Affairs. But history tells us that such people have been there – in every generation.

We are now dealing with the next generation of parents – of the next group of baby boomers. By 2015 Melbourne’s population will be 7.353 million and Sydney’s 7.716 million. Will our children be in private ‘for profit’ schools ‘ charters, or academies run by multinational

corporations, depending for ‘charity’ on perhaps a few genuine religious schools, or will they still have the ‘right’ to an education in a public education system?

I dream of Joe Hill, who, looking at the hangman's noose, told his union mates to go on and ORGANISE.

Let us lift our eyes to the broader canvas.

Australia is not alone in the current drive for wholesale privatisation of public educational facilities. The religious administrations have appeared to become more powerful in financial terms – even if their moral credibility is somewhat tarnished. But, they and their bleatings of ‘parental choice’ – the only argument left to them I suggest - are merely convenient to the rhetoric of even more determined and powerful adversaries.

Currently, here is a lot of hedge fund , superannuation, and sovereign wealth fund capital travelling the world in search of profits. And what better consumers, they reason, than insecure middle class parents – wherever they may be found?

The purchase of public enterprises of democratic countries, our inheritance from previous generations, is high on their agenda.

In our own time, we have seen, not only in this country, but in the UK and America the

- Withdrawal of funding and resources from public education
- The constant media cry of ‘crises’ in public education
- The demand for ‘reform’ of public education
- The development and peddling of testing procedures and curriculum resources by multinational corporations
- The ‘sponsoring’ of cash strapped public schools by corporations
- The establishment of ‘Independent’ public schools in Australia which are in part modelled on
- The academies and charter schools of the United States.

I could go on. There have been many objections to the selling off of our children's inheritance by the Lib-Labs. You may read about the battle for Richmond in the book by Steve Jolly, *'Behind the Lines'*.

When we object, we are bombarded with a new orthodoxy, a doctrine, complete with a new theocracy, which sets a mythical market place up in heaven and worships and glorifies it at the expense of reality and the well-being of the majority of our people. The New Market ideologues have not understood the political economists of the nineteenth century – not even Adam Smith, who despised monopolists. Instead they produce economists with never-ending statistics and graphs. They peer into these as if they were ancient Roman priests looking into the entrails of animals.

The rosy future these academic courtiers paint for the super wealthy and powerful and their ideology is under question. The 'trickle down' effect from the coffers of the wealthy 1% has not reached the other 99%.

Fortunately, we have now the work of the 21st century political economists,

Thomas Pickettyⁱ and Joseph Steiglitzⁱⁱ. For both writers, education is central to the solution to growing 'inequalities' in our societies. As Stiglitz says:

When you don't have equality of opportunity because you don't have equal access to education, it just seems so outrageous. It weakens our economy and leads to more inequality.

I am recommending then, that we do our historical and political economy homework, understand exactly what it is that we mean by a public education; avoid those peddling false hope with compromise and 'Needs policies'; and learn useful strategies from those who have gone before us.

We stand in the shadow of those who have gone before and ours is a noble cause. For to deprive a child of learning to read, write, and think for themselves is to visit, not only great harm on the child, but the nation of which he or she is a future citizen.

LISTEN TO DOGS PROGRAM

ON 3CR

855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS

ⁱ T. Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (2014) Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

ⁱⁱ J. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*. (2012) New York:
The great divide: unequal societies and what we can do about them. (2015) New York