

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

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**THE STRANGLEHOLD OF ELITE PRIVATE SCHOOLS
ON POWER IN AUSTRALIA**

Mike Secombe of the [Saturday Paper of 13 March](#) has written an insightful article on the rarefied and entitled boys-only private school network which has created massive imbalances and injustice in the halls of power.

As a springboard for his article he uses a comedian, Francis Greenslade, a graduate of St Peters Adelaide who regards himself as a renegade member of the privileged classe,. Greenslade is best known for his work on the infamous ABC's *Mad as Hell*.

Apart from background information on the current Christian Poerter rape allegation matter, the article exposes two very interesting pieces of information.

1. Firstly, Greenslade himself describes the attitude engendered in boys who attend the elite private schools of the nation
2. Secondly, the article lists the numbers of graduates from these schools who govern our country. Amongst other things, these men decide on the funding of our schools.

1. The Attitude Engendered in Boys Attending Elite Private Schools

Greenslade told Secombe that he got into debating as a student at his "posh" school in Adelaide, St Peter's College, a boys-only school favoured by the South Australian establishment. He himself did not regard himself as a member of the establishment but

"there was definitely a cohort of boys", he says, who were "arrogant and self-entitled".

"But I suspect they were arrogant and self-entitled before they even got to school," he says. "It's often the parents, I think."

St Peter's equipped Greenslade with skills as a debater and the qualifications for university. What it did not equip him for, though, was women.

"It was difficult," he recalls. "I think that the main thing for me about going to a single-sex boys' school is that once I got out I was not prepared for there to be a completely different gender. You know, talking to women, and just dealing with women as though they were people, did take me a while."

At university, Greenslade's passion for debating took him into even more rarefied company. He met people who are now politicians, judges, lawyers, the heads of ASX200 corporations.

This is hardly surprising. Not only does debating attract the brightest and most articulate students, it is often seen as part of preparation for public life, providing skills particularly useful in politics and the law. Greenslade never had ambitions in these areas; he simply enjoyed the cut and thrust of argument, the performance. He was very good at it, and went on to become an adjudicator of others.

“It’s often said that the eye-watering fees paid for places at some of Australia’s elite non-government schools are an investment in a child’s future social network, far more than in their academic future.”

As an adjudicator he remembered, not Christian Porter, but the clever girl from Adelaide who later accused the Attorney General of raping her at the 1988 Sydney competition.

2. The Graduates of Elite School Network in the Corridors of Power

What is of most interest in the Secombe article however, is the picture that emerges of the networks created by the alumni of elite private schools in the Australian corridors of power. Forget about the land of the “Fair Go”.

The Eton Oxbridge syndrome is being replicated in Australia.

went on to lead New South Wales and Western Australia, as well as a rollcall of prominent political, legal, business and scientific figures, including three Nobel laureates....

Greenslade believes that the current crisis for Christian Porter is not about law. It is about privilege and entitlement and the “club” of people like those he went to school with and debated against, who went on to careers in the law, judiciary, public service, business, media and, particularly, politics.

The composition of the Morrison government illustrates the point: 16 of 22 members of the cabinet are men. Save for one of these, all are white. *The Saturday Paper* has established the educational backgrounds of 15 of them.

Eleven went to non-government schools, mostly elite private ones. Seven of them, including Morrison himself, attended boys-only institutions. The Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg, provides some diversity; his schooling was elite, but also co-educational and Jewish Orthodox.

This world is so small that both Communications minister Paul Fletcher, a former dux of the private Sydney Grammar School, and Health minister Greg Hunt, who attended the Peninsula School in Victoria, were also in attendance at the ’88 debating competition.

Porter is from a similar rarefied pedigree, the son of Charles “Chilla” Porter, an Olympic high jumper turned Liberal Party powerbroker in Western Australia. Chilla’s own father, Charles Robert Porter, served in the Queensland state government from 1966 to 1980 and was

appointed the minister for Aboriginal and Islander Affairs in Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen's fifth ministry.

But when one looks more broadly at the composition of the federal parliament, the numbers tell a similar story of homogeneity. Just 23 per cent of Coalition members and senators are women, compared with 47 per cent for Labor, and 60 per cent for the Greens.

The conservatives' "women problem" — more accurately a lack of women problem — has been the subject of commentary for years. It flared up particularly about the time of the dumping of Malcolm Turnbull from the Liberal leadership, with claims of sexism and bullying.

Several capable women, among them Julia Banks, Kelly O'Dwyer and deputy leader Julie Bishop, subsequently quit politics. As Bishop reminded us again in an interview this week, a group of men describing themselves as the "big swinging dicks" conspired to thwart her career.

Other Liberal women complained at the time but stayed on. Senator Linda Reynolds was one of them, after she publicly lamented in August 2018: "I do not recognise my party at the moment. I do not recognise the values. I do not recognise the bullying and intimidation that has gone on."

Reynolds, the Defence minister, is now a central figure in another gendered crisis for the government, accused of being insufficiently supportive after the alleged rape, in March 2019, of one of her staffers, Brittany Higgins, then aged 24, by a more senior staff member, in Reynolds' ministerial office.

How desirable are Private Schools?

Francis Greenslade wonders whether Australia's private school system is desirable at all. Mike Secombe does not disagree. He notes that

Recent events have certainly lit a fire under elite boys' schools, which so disproportionately turn out national leaders. And interestingly, the fire has been fuelled by their elite female equivalents. And

It's a good question. The data shows not only that this country is sliding down international rankings in terms of education, but also that Australia's educational outcomes are more polarised than in most comparable nations.

It is clear that students from less advantaged backgrounds suffer in under-resourced schools. But it is less clear whether those from more-privileged backgrounds actually benefit much, in purely academic terms, from private education. An array of socioeconomic factors means they would likely do well anyway.

He goes on to discuss the usual problems arising from Australia's private school syndrome trying to be academic about what the DOGS see as a very simple problem. He writes:

Economists have a term for things that are valued more for the status they advertise than for their utility: positional goods. Perhaps a private school education could be seen in a similar way, as something valued for the status and contacts it provides.

It's often said that the eye-watering fees paid for places at some of Australia's elite non-government schools are an investment in a child's future social network, far more than in their academic future.

Jordana Hunter, education program director at the Grattan Institute, says it's complicated. "It can be hard to disentangle learning effects from networking effects. Networks seem to be quite significant in terms of success later in life. And that's above and beyond a cognitive literacy and numeracy learning effect," she says.

Which is to say, it's not what you know, it's who you know.

Hunter offers another insight, of particular relevance to politics: "It's hard to understand the concerns of people you don't empathise with, and hard to empathise with people [who] you don't know."

And when you have leaders drawn from a very narrow, privileged background, that has serious ramifications — both in terms of understanding of sexual consent and beyond.

Consider, for example, the Morrison government's response to the Covid-19 recession. Women, as the Grattan Institute detailed in a comprehensive report this week, lost their jobs at twice the rate men did. They were saddled with more unpaid work, including supervising children learning remotely. They were less likely to get government support, because JobKeeper excluded short-term casuals, who in the hardest-hit industries are mostly women.

Yet the government directed substantial support to sectors, such as construction, that were little affected. It pumped more resources into apprenticeships, which historically are 70 per cent male, and ignored tertiary education, which is heavily female.

Grattan's chief executive, Danielle Wood, can cite innumerable examples, from childcare to superannuation to homelessness, where women are relatively disadvantaged.

It comes back to a lack of diversity among politicians, she says.

"They just haven't had the lived experience. And they don't necessarily deal with a lot of people that have had that lived experience. And so, we end up focusing on a narrower set of policy issues than we should."

This criticism goes beyond gender to class and race issues, too. For the moment, the focus is on the treatment of women.

Kate Jenkins may be right. Perhaps we have reached a moment of real change. But the "club", as Greenslade calls it, is very good at protecting its privilege.

It is also very good at silencing its critics by deflecting, intimidating, stonewalling and using the shame felt by its victims against them. But if the past few weeks have shown anything, it's the power of those victims' stories when they are told.

DOGS POSITION

Mike Secombe has written a very interesting article, gleaning a lot of insightful information for Saturday Paper readers concerning the Chris Porter matter.

But DOGS position has always been that State Aid to private schools introduces a cancer into the Body Politic and if only for that reason, is bad public policy. The current scandals racking the Morrison Government have their roots in the division of children on the basis of class, creed, colour and gender at school. This division, euphemistically called 'networking' undermines the health of the body politic. In spite of Morrison's bleats of moral indignation, it also undermines the Rule of Law. The DOGS High Court case, if it did nothing else, proved that.

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