

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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Australia and Elitism in Education

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Australian educators and politicians consistently refuse to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of the public education system they inherited from their nineteenth century forebears.

This was a system open to all children with offence to none which broke away from the elitist traditions of the old world, most particularly Great Britain. But the church leaders from that old world, particularly from Ireland and the UK have never given up their dreams of power and privilege.

In a recent article on his blog, entitled *Australia Education – A Lone Wolf?* Pasi Sahlberg has claimed that Australia is an Educational Lone Wolf, an outlier in terms of the direction other education systems are now heading. He believes that Australia is not learning from international examples. The article on his blog is well worth reading, but DOGS believe that Australia is marching backwards in its educational policies, into a British class system based upon false elitism.

The following article from The Observer in the UK on the elitism inbuilt into the system in that country has strong echoes for what is happening in Australia.

The Observer view on radical change being needed to overcome elitism in education

Observer editorial

In acting as a conveyor belt to the most sought-after jobs, many schools shut out more able young people

Meritocracy is one of society's most powerful myths. It is comforting to believe we live in a fair world where people are rewarded for a mixture of talent and effort. But Britain remains an elitist country in which a socially stratified education system funnels those born to privilege into the highest-status jobs, while holding back children born to parents who have never benefited from such opportunities.

So Keir Starmer's pledge to remove the charitable status of private schools, and requiring them to charge VAT on fees, is a welcome move. Just 7% of children **attend private schools**. Yet privately educated young people make up almost one in three undergraduates at the country's most selective universities. In the jobs market, the **figures are even worse**: two-thirds of the senior judiciary were privately educated as were six out of 10 civil service permanent secretaries, more than half of diplomats and more than four in 10 senior media editors. This is not a product simply of their raw ability, but also of the vast resources that go into their education, the social connections and favours it opens up and the other forms of cultural capital it endows.

Private schools create social harms. In acting as a conveyor belt to the most sought-after jobs they shut out other, more able, young people who lack those advantages. They cream young people from disproportionately affluent backgrounds out of the state system, which has a negative impact on attainment for everyone else. It is wrong in principle that these schools should accrue the tax benefits of charities.

So it is right that **Labour** has restated its 2017 manifesto commitment to end their charitable status, a proposal also floated by Michael Gove when he was Conservative education secretary. But as far as measures to crack the elitism of Britain's education system go, it is fairly incremental. It would raise £1.7bn, an amount dwarfed by the overall education budget, and do little to unpick the advantages of a private school education.

To combat inequality in the education system, there are bigger fish to fry. Three- and four-year-olds from some of the most disadvantaged homes – 80% of those in the bottom third of the income distribution – are entitled only to 15 hours of free education a week if their parents **do not meet eligibility requirements** for more free hours, whereas those that do get access to 30 free hours a week. This is an astonishing social injustice given the impact high-quality early years education can have for children from less affluent backgrounds, amplified by the fact that **funding cuts** for early years provision have had the sharpest impact on the poorest areas.

In the state school system, there remains too much selection – both explicit, in the form of grammar schools, and by the back door. Where they still exist, **grammar schools are disproportionately dominated** by children from more advantaged backgrounds, with parents often paying for private tuition to support them through the 11-plus. Children from low-income

backgrounds do worse on average in areas where there is selection at 11. Grammar schools should therefore be abolished. Beyond that, there is too much selection by postcode; the best-performing comprehensives are least likely to accept children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Sutton Trust educational charity estimated in 2017 that living near a good comprehensive added about 20% to house prices. To open up more equitable access to the country's best schools, children eligible for the pupil premium – a good indicator of deprivation – should be given priority in school admissions in the same way children in care are. Far more effort must be channelled into catch-up tuition in the wake of the pandemic; experts fear that uneven learning loss during Covid-19, with children from poorer backgrounds suffering the most, will mean there is a bigger attainment gap between richer and less affluent children in this generation. And there needs to be far less focus on structural reform – there is no evidence that the government's academy reforms have done anything to **improve standards** across the board – and more on how to get the best-quality teachers to schools serving the most disadvantaged areas, to avoid **teacher shortages** affecting these areas the most.

The university system in the UK is academically stratified to absurd levels, with a difference of one or two A level grades pushing a young person towards a different institution altogether. This in turn creates a very socially stratified system, in which the institution a young person attends is treated as a shorthand for their employment potential. As a condition of funding, universities should be set much more stringent targets to recruit more **students from disadvantaged backgrounds** – those eligible for the pupil premium make up just 2% of admissions to the most selective universities, despite being 13% of all young people. Oxford and Cambridge should be opened up to a much more diverse group of students – perhaps by guaranteeing a place to the top-performing students at every school, or by experimenting with admissions lotteries for all those who meet a minimum grade requirement for their subject. The **taxpayer subsidy** that is channelled to the disproportionately middle-class group of young people who go to university through subsidised loans, around £30,000, should be expanded to cover all young people regardless of the post-18 educational route they choose.

Starmer's pledge to impose VAT on private school fees is a start. But it could only ever play a limited role in achieving an education system that opens up opportunities to all children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth.

This article was amended on 5 December 2022. A previous version incorrectly stated that seven in 10 members of the judiciary were privately educated; it is actually two-thirds of the senior judiciary.

COMMENT

- **Radleyman**
To overcome elitism in British education, just do one thing: follow Finland.

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