

# **Education: we all lose when we separate our children at the school gate**

**26 May 2013**

DOGS defend and promote public education because it is the only system which is open to all children. It is the cornerstone of a democracy. When it is encouraged with billions of dollars of taxpayer funds the private sectarian system cuts across and undermines the public system. It is the basis of a plutocracy, an aristocracy or worst of all, a theocracy.

Many of our public schools are inspiring.

But the edge is taken off our pleasure when we observe the neglected infrastructure and the increasing indeed chronic unfairnesses of our Australian society.

## **What is the answer ?**

- Australia found it in the late nineteenth century and lost it in the 1960s under the Menzies and later the Whitlam Governments. Australia defended its public system with sole public funding.
- State Aid to private education was abolished for 80 odd years. The problem of increased segregation commenced with the giving of State Aid in the 1960s and the opening of the floodgates in 1973.
- The state should become a legitimate education provider of the best, rather than a defender of the second best.
- Private schools should be put back in the box where they belong in a democracy – the box labelled Independent schools – independent of taxpayer funding.
- Only a strong public system with sole public funding puts private school ideology on the back foot: private schools become the obvious social engineers protecting the advantaged.

Unless the clock is turned back Australia is well on the way to emulating the class based system of Great Britain – or worse.

Only a minority of local upper-middle-class are now families sending their children to our inclusive, well-run, public schools. And advocates of wealthy private schools like Tim Hawkes of Kings School Parramatta consider that such families should pay fees if they do so!

The upper-middle class and members of the insecure middle classes ferry their children miles away to be privately educated, where they will mix with their own, unsullied by contact with – as they see it — Australia's hoi polloi. What the average private fees are buying is in essence the chance for children of the selfish classes to leapfrog their fellows in the public system. They buy their children segregation and

advantage, shaking their heads sadly that the local state school is not good enough for their very special children.

Everyone knows the unfairness of the Australian private school system; few politicians and even fewer commentators dare discuss it. They will be dismissed as apologists for statism, social engineering, low educational standards and championing the politics of envy while denying choice. Australia's private school industry is now very large, educating one third of Australian children. Which politician wants to alienate so many voters and our overwhelmingly centre-right press that support it to the hilt?

In this Australia is lagging behind its alma mater in the field of class consciousness – Great Britain.

UK commentators are far from shy about discussing the issue of segregation in that country. Last week, Lord Adonis, ex-schools minister and apostle of academies, ventured into the minefield. *It is seriously disabling for students going to exclusive fee-paying schools that they see so little of society, he told the Brighton College educational conference. They mix in a very narrow social medium. They don't, for the most part, meet the most of the rest of society, including those who don't have parents of substantial means. If what we want is a one-nation society, it is not good for them and it is not good for wider society.*"

It is a good argument, but aimed more at the wider society than those in the "narrow social medium". After all, private education's capacity to deliver is based precisely on its social exclusivity; surrender that and you surrender everything.

Those who can pay the ever increasing private school fees are what economist Alison Wolf calls "super-families" – partnerships of highly educated, highly paid professional men and women who see education as the positional good they must buy for their children. Britain and Australia are the easiest places in the world to do it, inevitably closing down the opportunities and chances for others.

The City, of London super-families and private schools have little interest in a 'one nation' society. After all, Maggie Thatcher claimed that 'society' no longer existed. In Australia the political rhetoric rather than the reality of multi-culturalism has displaced the tolerance that can be learnt in the school playground of public schools.

The new right ideologues who are pushing the 'market' ideology in education are heavily investing in an alternative philosophy – that the state is burdensome and ineffective, especially in education, and any obstacle to personal choice is motivated by social engineering and envy. This all leads to a wider nexus of ideas: the only route to economic and social success is the minimal state, deregulation and the free market.

Yet the idea of a cohesive nation state is more than a feel-good slogan. Societies are built on multiple interdependencies. Trust, the foundation of human relationships, is created around reciprocity. An elite that segregates itself is declaring it does not want to be part of reciprocal relationships of trust. All that matters is its own betterment. Entrepreneurship and innovation, as entrepreneurs and innovators know full well, happen best in a climate of openness, access and high trust, not in societies managed to deliver economic rent and advantage to a self-perpetuating oligarchy of the privately educated.

### **What is the answer ? DOGS repeat:**

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A strong public system with sole public funding puts private school ideology on the back foot: private schools become the obvious social engineers protecting the advantaged. Also see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/may/11/more-academies-end-educational-apartheid>

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