

# NATIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM

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## **Session Four: For all children - achieving quality and equity in Australian schooling**

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**Gerard Noonan**

#### **Pedagogical platypus**

We live on a large island a long way away from our northern hemisphere compatriots. Indeed we live a long way from others in the southern hemisphere, for that matter. This perhaps wouldn't matter so much if Australia was simply a holiday destination filled with interesting marsupials and monotremes not seen elsewhere on the globe.

Australia's geographic isolation from the vast majority of people has sometimes been a blessing. This nation had an early mover advantage on some things: female emancipation, for instance, widespread and almost universal health care, for another, and even mixed bathing on beaches and surfing.

But - the miracles of telecommunications notwithstanding - Australians don't seem to realise just how far out of kilter with the rest of the developed world is the system of school funding. Over the past 160 years in the seclusion of the Antipodes, it has evolved its own set of webbed feet, a duck bill and a venomous spur not seen elsewhere.

Most people I have talked to over the years have been unaware that Australia, far from being a middle order player with a robust but mainstream education system, is a significant outlier in the way it provides general taxation revenue funding to a surprisingly large private sector schooling system which is closer to a third world approach than that of the mainstream developed world.

Several years ago, I was privileged to attend a lecture given one evening in Sydney by Professor Barry McGaw, who was at that time the head of the Directorate of Education at the OECD, often called the 'rich country club', but in fairness the organization covering most so-called Western countries with functioning systems of democracy. In that exalted position, Professor McGaw had a marvellous insight into the comparative functioning of the education systems of the 30 or so countries which comprised the OECD cluster. What struck me most about this diverting presentation were two things: how quality and equity were traded off in school systems across the OECD countries; and secondly the basic data about how the different systems functioned and were funded.

Professor McGaw pointed out that the 'stratification of schools' mattered. The data showed that Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, the US, France, Austria and Norway were the schooling systems where there was high quality but low equity. That is, the gap between the best and the worst students was quite marked. In contrast, Finland, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Korea, Japan and Iceland fell into the category of high

quality/high equity countries. And there were groups in-between, with low quality and low equity correlations.

His conclusion?

“Systems that differentiate students early – as early as age 11 – into schools of different types, tend to be low quality, low equity while systems that remained comprehensive (at least to age 15) tended to be high quality, with some also high equity”.

Keep that in mind when we get to the second of Professor McGaw’s observations.

Countries in the OECD where the public schooling system educated 90 per cent of all the school age population included the following: Denmark, the USA, Portugal, Japan, Mexico, Austria, New Zealand, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Switzerland, Canada, Germany, Slovak Republic, Norway, Finland, Czech Republic, Iceland, Poland, Sweden and Ireland. That is, less than 10 per cent of the school age population were educated outside the comprehensive, secular, publicly funded education systems of those countries – including the land of the free, the United States of America.

Only Luxembourg, France, Korea, Australia, Spain, the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands ran systems where more than 10 per cent of the school age population attended schools which he defined as ‘government dependent private’ or ‘independent’.

In the UK’s case, 65 percent attended public schools, 30 percent ‘government dependent private’ and 5 per cent ‘independent’. Australia had 25 per cent of the school age population attending ‘government dependent private’ schools with only a negligible amount at ‘independent’ schools – that is, those which received no government assistance at all.

The Netherlands was the absolute outlier, with 76 per cent in government dependent private schools and just 1 per cent in independent schools. Its next-door neighbour Belgium had 40 per cent public and 60 per cent government dependent private. (Perhaps the two Low Countries were making up for their geographic flatness by creating a sharply discriminatory educational topography).

But Professor McGaw noted that if schools in Belgium accepted even a single Euro in fees from parents, they would lose their entire government funding – it was seen as a way of maintaining equity across the schooling system: that is, the government weren’t hung up on who ran schools so long as they met quality criteria, but they were deliberately seeking to create a level playing field.

Professor McGaw completed his lecture in an interesting way: He challenged his audience to consider the issue of whether wealthy parents could produce resource differentiation (pretty easy answer to that) and whether schools for new groups were likely to impede integration.

Then he went on to ask what Australia should do. These are what Professor McGaw recommended:

- Celebrate the high average quality of all Australian schools
- Worry about the lack of equity
- Consider the way in which lack of equity differentiates public and private
- Focus on the quality of Australia’s public schools

- Increase the ownership of public schools by distinguishing the source of funds from the source of control
- Build community control of its public schools
- Monitor quality of all its schools

And he left a final warning that, in the pursuit of equity – fairness – we needed to ensure that we did not threaten quality by asking whether the resistance to experimentation in the name of equity could lead to a ‘levelling down’ not a ‘levelling up’.

Now these figures came from a lecture given in mid 2003, so they obviously refer to a period before then. But as we know all too well here in Australia, these sorts of shifts in the funding and performance of schooling systems do not change that dramatically, even when there is a change in government. And it’s true that Barry McGaw has been engaged in public debate since his return to Melbourne from his *soujourner Parisienne* and may have had a Damascan moment since then. But I doubt it.

However, the facts of his presentation still stand: I don’t think anyone should be allowed to think that Australia is in the mainstream when it comes to educational funding structures. It’s not. Or at least not very. But enough of plagiarizing Professor McGaw for the moment.

### **How did Howard survive?**

In the general euphoria surrounding the end of the Howard government era in late 2007, there was certainly an expectation that certain conservative shibboleths would wither up and drop: the toxic-ly named ‘work choices’, and growth-at-any-cost CO2 pollution. There was early warning in the lead-up to the actual elections that an incoming government headed by Kevin Rudd might not move quickly on an obvious area of poor public policy – that of overturning the worst of the Howard government’s excesses and largesse towards the private sector. The cynics amongst us felt that, in its determination to win power, Labor was deliberately backpedalling on an earlier opposition to the Socio Economic Status model of funding so beloved of Howard and David Kemp and Amanda Vanstone and Brendan Nelson (remember them?). It was dressed up as ‘not doing a Latham’ – by which was meant not stating the bleeding obvious, as Mark Latham had done, that the SES system had delivered up grossly distorted and totally indefensible outcomes even within the first couple of years of its operations. This was most noticeable with the Catholic schooling system, where roughly two thirds of all schools (and this included the supposedly poor parish schools) had fallen into the two SES categories of ‘Funding maintained’ and ‘funding guaranteed’ ... meaning they were getting more under the SES formula than they would be entitled to had the measuring stick been truly and fairly applied. It was a shorthand way of saying that the Catholic system had become a largely middle to upper class schooling system masquerading as a poorer working class one. This was hardly radical. Some of the best and fairest operatives in the Catholic system privately agreed.

[I should here declare what might be obvious to many in the room that, with a given name like Gerard and a family name Noonan, and having seven siblings, I was brought up as a Catholic in the Melbourne suburban miasma of Daniel Mannix, one of 107 kids in year one at St Francis Xavier’s Catholic primary school (since demolished) in the outer Melbourne suburb of Frankston. Happy atheism has been my lot in my adult years, but I’m certainly familiar with how the Catholics – and for that matter the Anglicans, Lutherans, Jews and recently Muslims – can throw around their political weight.]

Latham had perhaps been smart enough not to poke the Catholic ants nest, but he had singled out that bastion of educational poverty The Kings School, and had received a kicking for being so bold.

However there were others among us who felt that the backpedalling was a temporary measure and that, with the smart, agent-for-change Victorian 'left' operative Julia Gillard as the steward, and with a new Prime Minister given to genuinely moving "Sorry" utterances and joining the mainstream by getting involved in the global warming debate, that the commitment to maintain the SES system undiluted would be weakened as common sense and common decency prevailed.

This was reinforced in my case by listening to, and later reading Rudd's startling "Bonhoeffer" lecture to New College at the University of New South Wales in October 2005, that is, just two years before he became elevated to The Lodge. It's certainly worth a read – revealingly, he titled it "Church and State: Christianity and politics".

In the lecture, Rudd spends some time celebrating the bravery of the activist and dissenting Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who stood up to the corruption and collaborationist mainstream Lutheran church in Germany in the 1930s. Bonhoeffer was hanged in Buchenwald concentration camp – at the express orders of Hitler in April 1945, in the final dying days of the European war. Then Rudd examines, with evident feeling, the role of dissent and the experience of the early Christian church as being one of an 'oppressed minority'.

I'm quoting him now:

"I would argue that a core and continuing fundamental principle shaping this engagement [the long history of difficult co-habitation of Church and state] is that Christianity is always on the side of the marginalized, the vulnerable and the oppressed."

Then: "Do these principles of themselves provide a universal precept upon which every element of social and economic policy can be constructed? Of course not. But it does provide an illuminating principle (dare I say "light on the hill") in shaping our views of what constitute appropriate policy for the community."

So you might forgive my lapse into idealism that Kevin and Julia might have been foxing a little when they insisted they wouldn't overturn the SES system immediately.

Two things come to mind here.

The first is that committing to a quadrennium funding system means the lead times for change are long ... very long. In fact assume that Rudd decides to run full term and face the electors as scheduled in late 2010, only two of the current four years of SES Mark 2 would have elapsed.

He (or she) would therefore be going into a third election in 2013 at the latest. Is it really feasible that Labor would have the courage to begin the dismantlement of the most discriminatory parts of the SES system in the year or so before an election, when it would be extremely vulnerable to a well-oiled campaign by powerful forces a long way removed from Bonhoeffer's marginalized, vulnerable and oppressed.

I've been puzzling with myself for the past year at the apparent timidity and pusillanimity on education funding change of the "Bonhoeffer" Rudd and the Gillard of working class Welsh immigrants – a lawyer from the tough Labor left firm of Slater and Gordon.

Might it be that both she and Kevin Rudd, who came through the public schooling system (Rudd attended a state primary school and Nambour High in Queensland along with Wayne Swan while Gillard went to state schools after the family settled in Adelaide) see themselves and their now lofty positions as vindications that the state system can produce such prodigies? Does that therefore colour their views and allow them to discount the calls of 'unfair' by those seeking to restore a better balance and sideline those publicly advocating a better carve-up of the educational funding pie as far too imbued with Lathamesque class envy?

The second passing thought is this: could the current global financial dislocation come to the rescue? Might it be that, having to delve deep to find the \$42 billion to keep the current SES system functioning, the hard heads in the Labor Government ... by which I mean Lindsay Tanner and perhaps Chris Bowen ... will they be in a position to stiffen up the resolve and force a more equitable change. They will surely be in a strong position to argue that fiscal rectitude needs to take precedence over political expediency.

### **Uncle Sam**

Finally, and briefly, a word on Uncle Sam.

What are we to make of the staggeringly grotesque views of Rupert Murdoch in his recent Boyer lectures broadcast on ABC radio about Australian education? They certainly need a riposte. First, what would Rupert know anyway? Here's a bloke who spent his entire life, long ago in Australia, living in personal luxury, by any standards, and who brought kids up (or more accurately his former wife Anna did) in Australia in a similar vein, offering free advice about how the country needs to pull itself up by the shoelaces. Like all free advice, it's worth that amount. Murdoch has recently – and acidly – been described by *The Monthly's* Gideon Haig as “the stateless, weightless, dessicated calculating machine of the era of mass communications. Now 77, an age when most men of his accomplishment are sitting to have their portraits painted or dictating self-justifying memoirs, he has settled for a cross between the two: sitting for 50 hours to share his memories and musings with *Vanity Fair's* Michael Wolff.”

From reading the lectures, it seems clear that some ideological bigot from one of his local mastheads ghosted at least that part of his 'lectures'. The idea that Australia's schooling system is mired in mediocrity and should mimic the spotty, patchy and often lamentable US performance is laughable. The Czech republic, perhaps, or South Korea, or Finland ... but Des Moines Iowa or Hoboken, New Jersey? Please. Save us from the self-justifying ruminations of expatriates mesmerized by images of American exceptionalism. By the way, this is the same Rupert Murdoch, deeply indebted, whose company wrote off a cool \$8.3 billion during the past half year.

So what is Julia Gillard up to with her championing of Rupert's fellow New York denizen Joel Klein, who has been pushing a "measure-up-or-close-down" model of running the New York public schooling system? It should come as little surprise that Murdoch's *New York Post* lionizes the same Joel Klein. In essence Klein promotes a constant testing regime of students in the New York area – and ostentatiously publishes such data, using parental 'right to know' as the justification. It uses the bottom decile of this performance data as a bludgeon to cut off funding to schools which are then, inevitably, forced to close. Out of the crucible - Ayn Rand-like - new schools are supposed to rise from the ashes and a new cycle begins.

My hunch is that Julia has sat through enough sessions with the measurement-obsessed Kevin Rudd to realize that championing something which looks numeric, managerial and American – all tick boxes - will get him off her back. She may believe in it, in the same way that someone who buys a car repair manual

believes they'll be OK replacing gudgeon pins on a crankshaft. Or she may simply have too much on her plate with multiple Ministries and long spells as Deputy PM while the boss is away (he is at the moment) and have picked up the latest thing from her latest trip offshore.

At the most superficial level, the Klein idea looks interesting, but its many critics suggest she might be wise applying that old dictum of *caveat emptor* learnt in her days at Slater and Gordon. In a world where the Federal Government (and state governments too) have so blatantly failed one simple educational test themselves – bringing the five per cent of Aboriginal kids in regional areas within cooeee of the literacy, numeracy and socialization results of their non indigenous peers - what in heavens name is the federal Education Minister tooling around with a controversial, flaky system of carrot and stick funding and testing?

It may or it may not work, but what's the point expending all that energy? I don't mean to argue that testing can't prove useful. But it might also be just as useful to ask teachers, much of whose world is made up of testing, what they think of the NYPD – the New York Pedogogical Department – before it's imposed from above as a pet project. There are surely other opportunities worth exploring to achieve quality results – and fairness and equity - in Australian schooling. Many of those opportunities lie much closer to home.