

The Private School Ascendancy: An Origin Story

Barbara Preston

barbara.preston59@gmail.com --- 0439 478 919

Symposium: Critical policy junctures, private school hegemony and potential counter hegemonic challenges

Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference

University of Melbourne

30 November 2023

Where are we now?

- The largest proportion of students in largely unregulated, autonomous private schools among OECD countries after Chile.
- Increasing private sector share of enrolments: from 22% in 1978 to 36% in 2022.
- Increasing concentration of advantaged students in the private sectors – both Catholic and independent. Increasing concentration of disadvantaged students in the public sector.
- Increasing segregation of students on ethnic and religious grounds as well as socio-economic status
- Declining overall academic achievement.

How did we get here?

1. Was it in the sectarianism, Tory establishment and large working class Irish Catholic population of colonial times?
2. Was it in the post-World War Two incremental re-establishment of state aid to private schools?
3. Was it in the 1973 Karmel report and its recommendations - in cultural, political and constitutional context (the **'Karmel settlement'**)?
4. Was it in post-Karmel developments?
5. Was it in the 2011 first Gonski report and subsequent developments?

1. Colonial times - establishing the shape of Australian schooling

- Early opposition to non-sectarian public schooling by Anglican church & wealthy colonists
- High fee independent schools with full secondary education providing access to powerful social positions and university - a status jealously guarded. The Kings School in 1831 with public funds. Many more with gold rush wealth. 'Education for leadership'.
- Catholic systemic schools for the large, mostly working class, Catholic population - in 1865 the Pope denounced public schooling and required Catholics to attend Catholic schools
- Free, secular public schooling systems established by the separate colonies 1872 - 1895:
 - universally accessible schooling for the compulsory years
 - **weak upper secondary** levels – important to the powerful; access to university
 - no state aid to private schools

2. Post WWII incremental re-introduction of state aid

- Early 1950s – Federal income tax deductions for donations to school building funds - after Headmasters' Conference lobbying
- 1950s - State bursaries for secondary education at any school
- **October 1957: SPUTNIK 'National survival': modernising; science; yr 12 retention**
- 1964 – Commonwealth scholarships for senior secondary. Favoured high SES
- Late 1960s – Commonwealth funds for science laboratories and libraries (after initial opposition from Headmasters' Conference as threat to autonomy - and funding Catholics). Matching grants favoured high fee schools.
- 1970 – Commonwealth per capita grants to all private schools

3a. Context of the Whitlam government and Karmel report

- Existing general recurrent grants to all private schools and other forms of state aid
- Importance of the Catholic vote for Labor that had previously gone to the Coalition via the DLP. Genuine needs in Catholic parish schools.
- Assumption of social progressiveness of Whitlam government
- Concerted media campaigns blaming public schools and teachers for declining standards
- Continuing religious sectarianism

3b. Content of the Karmel report

- Terms of reference and recommendations make no conceptual distinction between public and private schools – treat the public and private sectors ‘alike’
 - **the blindness of sector-blind policies** -
- No account taken of:
 - the public sector’s unique responsibilities and constraints, and the private sectors’ concomitant freedoms
 - the political power of the private sectors and their focussed advocacy *versus* the states’ and territories’ divided responsibilities
 - vertical fiscal imbalance (fiscal weakness of states and territories)

3b. Content of the Karmel report - continued

- Terms of reference and recommendations include:
 - No conditions that would impact private schools' autonomy to control enrolments (selection, exclusion and overall enrolments), teacher recruitment, fees, or school location
 - No thought to forms of integration that had occurred in the Netherlands (1917), England (1944) and was planned for New Zealand
- Some eloquent content expressing concerns with impact on public schooling and society of funding private schools

4a. Post-Karmel developments: reception

- The Catholic Bishops allied with the high fee independent sector to ensure the interests of the private sector as a whole were advanced
- Public sector advocates either
 - enthusiastically welcomed the Karmel recommendations (needs-based, money for disadvantage, PD and progressive initiatives) **OR**
 - maintained a stark opposition to any state aid, which appeared out of touch with reality and sectarian

Nuanced concerns were not prominent, though appeared in texts (not recommendations) of some later Schools Commission reports.

4a. Post-Karmel developments

- Fraser government's increased private sector funding and overall declining enrolments led to sharply increasing private share of enrolments and share of higher SES students
- Hawke/Keating government's New Schools Policy and increased public sector funding, and stabilising overall enrolments led to slowing (but still increasing) private share of enrolments and of higher SES students
- Howard government's increased private sector funding led to further increasing private share of enrolments and higher SES students
 - rince and repeat –

5. 2011 Gonski Report & outcomes

- Repeated the sector-blindness of Karmel, denying reality.
- Some nice rhetoric in the text and some necessary new 'needs-based' recommendations
- valuable new funding for many public schools – but further increased funding for private schools
- But really little change from the Karmel settlement

I don't 'give a Gonski!'

Final thoughts : some necessary strategies 1.

- Recognise vertical fiscal imbalance, differences in lobbying focus and power, and competitive relationships between public and private, *and therefore*
 - **increase overall funding to public schools relative to private schools**
- Recognise fundamental differences between public and private schools: the public sector's unique responsibilities and constraints, and the private sectors' concomitant freedoms, *and therefore*
 - **fund the costs arising from public schools' responsibilities and constraints, and the private sectors' concomitant freedoms, including**

Final thoughts : some necessary strategies 2

- Commonwealth to fund all costs related to the induction and development of early career teachers, with additional funds to schools with larger proportions of beginning teachers (harder to staff and have lower SES students)
- Commonwealth provide additional funds to schools that experience greater than average fluctuations in enrolments in a locality
- Commonwealth reduce funds to academically selective schools (including public schools), and schools that provide music, sporting, academic etc scholarships
- Commonwealth require private schools to have reciprocal relationships with other private schools for excluded/expelled students
- Otherwise, Commonwealth to deduct funds from excluding/ expelling schools and provide additional funds to schools accepting expelled students

Thank you

barbara.preston59@gmail.com

0439 478 919

barbaraprestonresearch.com.au