

Public funding of private schools

By Lyndsay Connors

Under pressure in the last election context to justify its increasing preference for non-government schools in allocating Federal funding for education, the Howard Government positioned itself as an advocate for the families with children in these schools at the expense of advocacy for the nation's public schools.

This advocacy extended to adopting uncritically arguments advanced by some non-government school interest groups.

One such argument is that parents with children in non-government schools pay their tax, and are therefore entitled to a share of it back from governments to fund whatever kind of non-government school they choose.

The Federal Government's indifference to public schools has raised fears in the public sector, as have its attacks on public schools as 'value free' and 'politically correct'. Along with its recurrent funding increases to some of the country's most lavishly resourced high-fee schools, this has now re-kindled the divisive 'state aid' debate.

Arguments linking taxation and non-government school funding in this country go back to this debate. Its context was the bitter sectarian divide which existed from the earliest days of white settlement between the largely Irish, working-class Catholic community and the rest. By the last half of the nineteenth century, the largely Protestant majority then saw its interests served by the establishment of public schools.

The Catholic community argued for the next century that it contributed a significant share of taxes and that to exclude its large number of parish schools from any share of that funding was a form of sectarian discrimination.

Whether or not we agree with this historical argument, it is different from the argument that has now emerged and which is grounded in individual parental choice in the context of neo-liberal politics. It arises from an ideology that seeks to minimise the role of government. Its premise is that tax revenue is a means of providing incentives and rewards for personal advancement rather than a means of redistributing resources and opportunities to maintain social cohesion and broaden access to opportunities beyond those on high incomes. And those on high incomes cannot buy immunity from the effects of poor standards of public health or education, or a breakdown in environmental sustainability.

Without necessarily agreeing with the funding policies of particular governments or parties, we can all agree that in any decent, democratic society governments have a responsibility to protect the educational interests of all children and young people; and that there is a public interest in the quality of schooling available to all children.

It is possible to construct arguments for the public funding of non-government schools that stem from a concern for children and young people in their own right as citizens. Such arguments have both a moral and a rational force.

There is no logic, however, to the argument that parents with their children in non-government schools are entitled to have public funding paid either to themselves or to the school on the grounds that they have paid their tax to support public schools. All children are legally entitled to a place in a

public school. They retain that entitlement when their parents send them to other schools, and can take it up at any time should their parents so wish.

The tax we pay is not a personal deposit in a savings bank to be withdrawn for our individual purposes and priorities.

Paying tax is an obligation of citizenship. Meeting that obligation does not buy the individual taxpayer specific privileges or special rights. Parents with children in non-government schools simply have the same right as their fellow parents and citizens to participate in democratic debate about how governments should allocate tax revenues to education, according to priorities that can be justified on rational grounds.

There is a dangerous and divisive potential in the argument that the payment of tax by individual parents entitles their children's non-government schools to some share of public funding. It is an argument that cuts both ways. If you can argue that you have a right to direct your taxes to the school of your individual choice, then I can argue to have my tax withheld from a school operated by a group whose beliefs or practices I find personally objectionable. Taken to its extreme this argument brings into question why tax should be raised for schooling at all, particularly from citizens without children.

The recent Federal election has made more urgent the need for a national debate about the level of Commonwealth funding that non-government schools receive and the conditions that should apply to it, having regard to the nation's capacity to fund public schools to meet the responsibilities they bear.

The national government now spends more on the 12 per cent of children and young people in independent, non-government schools than on the 68 per cent in public schools. This is despite the fact that half of the schools in the independent sector boast resources in excess of the systemic schools, public and Catholic, that educate the vast majority. The Howard Government is even allocating more to

non-government schools than to public universities.

How can this perverse set of priorities be justified? Because parents who send their children to nongovernment schools pay their taxes? This argument simply does not make the grade.

About the author

Lyndsay Connors was a member of the former Commonwealth Schools Commission; and Deputy Chair of the Board of the ABC. She has held senior education posts in NSW; headed reviews in Victoria and the ACT; and now chairs the NSW Public Education Council.