

## **Liberal education: only the rich need apply**

**By Kenneth Davidson**

Is it any surprise that a Coalition plan will deliver more money to privileged schools?

I think the Howard Government has a third-term agenda. It is to further erode the Commonwealth commitment to public education and public health.

It would be unfair to call Howard's vision Menzian. Sir Robert Menzies was a product of his times. He was a builder with a strong, Scottish-inspired commitment to education. It was Menzies who translated Walter Burly Griffin's vision of Canberra into a national capital.

Menzies ignored the fact that the states had responsibility for universities. His government took over planning and funding responsibility for higher education.

Howard abandoned his 1996 election promise to at least maintain Commonwealth funding for higher education. Instead, his government cut higher education funding by 20 per cent or \$800 million. Now the universities, the main engine of economic and social change necessary to prosper in a globalised economy, are in deep crisis.

Howard's visions for health and education are consistent: an abhorrence of universal systems in which everybody pays through the tax system for a quality service that all classes are happy to use.

The overwhelming preference by Australians for Medicare has been abused since 1996 by gross distortions in the tax system, and by a shift from universal to age-rating for private insurance. The goal: to stampede the middle class into an expanding private health system by making clear that the Coalition will continue to screw down on funding the public hospital system.

Similarly, education. Commonwealth funding is being switched from public to private schools to reinforce middle-class predilections to acquire educational advantage for their children.

This is bad educationally and bad socially, but it's brilliant wedge politics. Stir up incipient middle-class resentment about paying taxes in order to finance a residualised public health and education system that the middle class is becoming increasingly unwilling to use.

The Coalition is the great residualiser under the rubric of high principle (freedom to choose in the case of education) or financial rectitude (government can't afford to pay for high-tech medicine in 2042).

Hence the two kites flown last week by Peter Costello (the further residualisation of health) and on education (the paper prepared for the Liberal Party think-tank, the Menzies Foundation).

The paper on education was rejected by the new Education Minister, Brendan Nelson, but it may be read as an ambit claim to test public opinion.

The authors say that most government schools are "safety net" schools. Why? Not because they are under-funded and under-resourced, but because they are operated under a stultifying, centralised, bureaucratic control that excludes innovation, competition and parental involvement.

The solution offered? Equality of funding, which just happens to mean more money for non-government schools allocated in a way that will give the greatest amounts to the wealthiest independent schools.

Funny isn't it? The per-student funding gap from all sources in favour of non-government schools is \$1400 under present arrangements and is expected to grow to \$2200 in 2005, based on Commonwealth figures.

According to the Menzies paper: "The amount of government support for students' education should be based on the average cost of educating a student at a government school, adjusted upward where required according to a schedule of costs based on educational need. Parental contributions to tuition fees and education expenses should be tax-deductable."

If this outrageous ambit claim on behalf of mainly rich parents was met by the government, the effect would be to widen the average resource gap between government and non-government schools from \$3500 now to \$4500 in 2005 - and cost revenue about \$3 billion a year.

Why? If additional resourcing is not the answer to the problems of government schools, how is the additional public funding proposed for non-government schools going to improve them?

Well no, it's not the money, it's the principle. According to the paper: "It is not possible to reconcile a commitment to choice and a commitment to 'free' education without an equal amount of money to students with similar educational needs."

So it is all about choice. According to the paper, all parents should have the right to choose, and poor parents will be just as willing as wealthy parents to exercise choice. But under the Liberal proposals, the chances of the poor getting a quality education would be even more problematic than now.

Choice of what? Not everybody can buy a "superior" or "exclusive" education. Most purchasers of a private education see their purchase as a "positional good" designed to buy a better position on the socio-economic ladder of life. Some want their religious beliefs passed on without the contamination of a diverse student population.

Why should the taxpayer fund these choices? Even now, the majority of the population want a quality public education for their children, some because they believe in an inclusive education system and others because they can't afford a private education.

Far from widening choice, the Menzies paper is about re-enforcing privilege and increasing socio-economic inequality. As such it is contemptible education policy for Australia.

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