

An invitation to scotch college

By Shane Maloney

Private schools must not be allowed to win their war against government schools.

Recently some observations I made at Scotch College in 2001 started spreading spontaneously around the country like some sort of email samizdat. Approving letters began to arrive from complete strangers. Journalists contacted me seeking verification. The town tabloid ran a story. The Sydney press followed. Rants against my novels were posted on a right-wing hate site.

My remarks were made to year 11 students in the course of a creative writing seminar. For the record, this is what I said:

"When I first received an inquiry about my availability to come and talk at this school, I was naturally reluctant. After all, this school has little to recommend it in the eyes of the wider community. Historically it has been simply a machine for the transmission of inherited privilege.

"It is a place where boys from middle-class backgrounds are sent to improve their material prospects and to reproduce the values of their class, or where the boys of insecure parents are sent to fulfil the distorted ambitions of their fathers.

"When I think of Scotch College, what comes immediately to mind are the values and actions of its most prominent Old Boys.

"I think of the scene I saw on television after Scotch old boy Jeff Kennett used his power and his philosophy to close down the only high school in the state specifically dedicated to the education of young Aboriginal people. How students from that school came here and stood at the gates and how your principal went out and told them to go away.

"I think of your old boy, David Kemp, the federal education minister, giving millions of dollars of public money to enhance the marketability of schools like this one - justifying his actions with statistics and arguments that he refuses to apply to the needs of the 70 per cent of Australian families who choose to educate their children in the democratic and equitable environment of government schools.

"I think, too, of the newspaper reports of the violent behaviour of some of your students - and the quick readiness with which these boys were defended and excused in the courts by their adult class allies.

"For these reasons, I was initially reluctant to come here.

"On the other hand, I thought, 'Well, all this is hardly the fault of the current crop of students.' It is not your fault, after all, that your families decided to institutionalise you. It is not your fault that your mothers and fathers elected to place you in the emotionally distorting and educationally deficient environment of an all-boys school.

"It is not your fault that your parents lacked sufficient confidence in your personal maturity and ability to respond to the opportunities offered by government school education - and Australia has one of the best systems in the world, by the way, despite the relentless propaganda to the contrary by the vested interest of the private-school lobby.

"Right now, you are the victims. Later, of course, society will be your victim, and will suffer from the attitudes with which you are indoctrinated here.

"But who knows? Just as prison does not always break the spirit of all who are incarcerated there, perhaps you will not turn out to be a burden to society.

"Perhaps when you leave here, some of you will even manage to contribute to the wellbeing of this country.

"I certainly hope so. But just to hedge my bets, I will be donating part of my fee today to the campaign for public education.

"Good luck with your studies and thanks for having me."

While these observations did not strike me as particularly original or remarkable, they were clearly new to many of the students. Impertinent, too. My teacher-escort looked at me like I'd just attempted to storm the Somme redoubt with an HB pencil. At the end of the session, several students approached me to reprise the usual arguments for government funding of rich private schools. A third-generation Scotch boy, the scion of a prominent Liberal dynasty, accused me of being "unfair".

Apart from sending copies to a few friends, including some Scotch survivors, I made no attempt to disseminate my remarks. Now, out of the blue, I am suddenly getting daily requests for approval to publish them. And I find myself described, inaccurately, as a public education activist.

So why this upsurge of interest, three years after the event?

My guess, based on incoming mail, is that Scotch College is perceived as emblematic of the private education lobby's increasingly aggressive war against government schools. And by criticising Scotch, I gave voice to a growing feeling among many parents, teacher and students of public schools that not enough of us are standing up for government education.

Education is a fundamental issue for millions of Australians. And public education is the preferred option of most parents. Yet, in the face of an imminent election, the major political parties seem unable to accept these facts. The Liberals, in reality if not in words, are committed to the systematic dismantling of public education. Labor, lacking a firm commitment to anything in particular, stands for its gradual impoverishment and erosion.

The schooling of our children has been reduced to a bargaining chip in wedge politics. The press is more than happy to help. After all, its education supplements are fattened with advertisements for enrolment-chasing independent schools. So every week brings coverage of some fresh "finding" by some "independent research institute" to prove that public education should be chopped into small pieces and flushed down the toilet.

Government school teachers are routinely denigrated and their wage claims described as attempted blackmail.

Meanwhile, our children are increasingly divided into educational ghettos that undermine our civil values and reward religious fundamentalism.

Meanwhile, behind the facade of choice, elite private schools plunge their hands deeper and deeper into the public pocket.

Grants provided by the Government, added to the fees paid by parents, are used by private schools to offset the cost of affiliation to lobby groups. These organisations, in turn, generate the arguments for further subsidies.

Parents who have invested big money in having their children featherbedded into university places and designer-branded into school-tie corporate networks hedge their bets by denigrating government schools. Competitive advantage is the name of the game. And it's a zero-sum game. Most parents realise this.

Soon after my comments at Scotch, the Liberal scheme to give hefty subsidies to wealthy private schools went before the Senate. Labor could have rejected it and forced an election on the issue of education. Polling indicated it would have romped home. Instead, it approved the bill, muttered its customary weasel words and sat on its hands until the Tampa hove into sight.

In the three years since, Labor appears to have learned nothing.

Despite the welter of dodgy statistics and high-flown arguments about choice, parents know that the answer is really quite simple. Schools need money. Our "better" schools have been operating on that assumption for generations.

So by way of a postscript to my speech of three years ago, I invite Scotch College to demonstrate its true independence and affirm its educational philosophy by declining all future government subsidies.

Noblesse, surely, compels it.

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