

Private education is bad for the economy

By Dr Janet McCalman

IN 1992 an anonymous group of educational psychologists in Britain reported that reading standards in primary schools were falling significantly. This decline correlated with other social data - rising mortality and morbidity rates - and they in turn correlated it with rising regional unemployment. Social inequality, it seems, is bad for children, and that is reflected in how well they learn in the classroom.

The decline in public health and educational standards in Britain in the 1980s was the outcome of the Thatcherite revolution, which widened the income gap between the beneficiaries of the new economy and the relics of the old.

Australia has always suffered from the British disease when it comes to schooling. We proclaim ourselves the champions of battlers, yet we sanction an education system that is dedicated to the production of inequality, social division and life-long unfairness.

David Kemp tells us that private schools save us taxes and, therefore, they are good for the nation. Apparently Australia will have a good education system once all the public schools have shrunk to educating only the children of the unemployed and destitute.

How this will magically produce better educational outcomes for the nation is unclear.

What is clear is that we will still be paying lots of taxes, because private schools cannot function without heavy government subsidy.

And, of course, we will also be paying school fees. It may be my poor arithmetic, but I suspect we might end up being even more out of pocket.

May I suggest another interpretation: that private education, like private health care, is in fact bad for the national economy. The impossible cost precludes private saving, starves business of investment, and diverts capital into personal services that are only indirectly contributing to the GDP. When the cost of secondary and tertiary education for two children equals the cost of a three-bedroom house, one can argue that private education is impoverishing middle Australia.

Of course this dreadful self-sacrifice by the low-income end of the private school clientele is what justifies the Federal Government's subsidisation of educational privilege. But for Melbourne Grammar to claim it is not an elite school because some of its families cannot really afford the fees is like a western suburbs college claiming it is socially prestigious because five of its families could afford to send their children to Ivanhoe Grammar but perversely choose not to.

This isn't envy speaking - my children have had a wonderful education in the state system. This is what I observe and what I've learnt from experience and research. I know that inequality is not good for people or society.

Inequality corrodes, saps, sours. For the few who are goaded into trying harder, there are many more who are demoralised and alienated. It breeds depression, frustration, resentment, violence and crime. It ``costs'' far more in the end, in social damage and despair. It benefits only the winners, and they must, by definition, be few.

Finally, it corrupts the soul. When children are brought up knowing their parents can buy them an express ticket to success, they will never learn to take their place in a complex world where living with others is more important than living for yourself.

And if there was once the Great Australian Ugliness, there was also the Great Australian Mediocrity - a dead hand of unimaginative leadership by men who got there because of the "old school tie". Two things opened this country up to innovation and new talent: post-war immigration and the expansion of state secondary education and the universities from the 1950s.

John Howard and David Kemp, however, speak for the Great Australian Mediocrity: the entrenchment of privilege, the exclusion of the battlers, the safety of dividing the world into the deserving and the undeserving.

This election comes at a critical time. This is the moment when we have to choose whether to invest in all our children, or only in those of the already fortunate. We have to choose whether we are going to be a society, or whether we are going to be a bear-pit of desperate people clawing each other so our children can get "an edge".

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