Challenging the dominant discourses of the state aid debate

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The state aid debate is one of the longest running and most intractable issues in the public policy sphere in Australia. Recent decisions by the Commonwealth government to increase funding to private schools has reignited the debate. But the traditional defences of public education have proved inadequate to the task of changing the course of current neo-liberal education policy trajectories. As the percentage of students attending private schools continues to grow, and as the spectre of a residualised public education system looms larger, so the need to rethink Australian public education becomes a more urgent project. In this paper we analyse what is happening and why, identify a range of concerns from the standpoint of a social democratic educational agenda, and theorise some possible strategies which might be pursued by those committed to a vibrant public schooling system in Australia.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, public education in Australia is undergoing paradigmatic change. An apparently unstoppable neo-liberal policy regime undermines the concept of education as a public good, and privileges its private purposes. In the schooling sector, an increasingly acrimonious public/private debate focusing on the question of government funding for private education is made manifest in the rapid, supply-led expansion of small and mostly religious schools and the proliferation of (state and private) school glossy brochures and slick mission statements.

‘State aid’ is one of the longest running and most intractable issues in the public policy sphere in Australia. The question of whether or not public monies should be spent on private schools, and if so, the extent of that funding summons up deeply held philosophical beliefs about the state and its obligations to citizens via the provision of basic services. In our view, the contemporary version of the debate has reached an impasse, with much of the discussion constituting little more than a familiar choreography of entrenched positions. As people committed to public education, our particular concern here is that the traditional defences of public education are proving inadequate to the task of changing the course of current neo-liberal education policy.
trajectories. As the percentage of students attending private schools continues to grow, and as the spectre of a residualised public education system looms ever larger, so the need to rethink Australian public education becomes a more urgent project.

In this paper we want to engage in some theorising about the nature of the current state aid debate by analysing what is happening and why, and by identifying a range of concerns from the standpoint of a social democratic educational agenda. Our purpose is to develop a basis upon which to make some tentative suggestions about strategic ways forward for public education.

THE STATE AID DEBATE: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EDUCATION AS DISTINCT SPHERES

For much of the 20th century, secular public schools – that is fully government provided and supported schools – were the only schools to receive government funds in Australia. Private schools operated solely on private income and, with the exception of poor Catholic schools, were seen largely as an option for the wealthy. All that changed once the Commonwealth and State governments began funding private schools in the 1960s, after which time the state aid debate became an established feature of the political and educational landscape.

In its early stages, the state aid debate functioned within two very distinct understandings about the purposes of public and private education. By the early 1970s Australian State governments had built a mass public schooling system, organised through and controlled by highly centralised State-based educational bureaucracies which sought to ensure uniform provision across each State. The secular public schools they administered were owned by the State, resourced by government funds, free, staffed by State-employed teachers, and required to accept all students under the age of compulsion (15 years of age) in their local area or zones. Public education was seen as a collective, as well as an individual benefit, a means of achieving both family and social reproduction and improvement, an institution that served civic, cultural and economic purposes, and an avenue for social mobility. These varying purposes produced a range of contradictions and tensions in the organisation and curriculum of public schools. While the public schooling culture promoted selection and was implicated in reproducing an unequal status quo, it also paradoxically supported dreams of greater equity, born from the pushes for social mobility, from the civic dream of a ‘classless society’ and a worker’s paradise, and from civic and economic demands to continue to raise the mass level of education.

No such tensions were inbuilt into the private school sector where schools were not owned by the State, but from the 1960s received State subsidies to supplement the tuition fees they charged. They could be overtly selective, and screen their ‘clients’ on the basis of capacity to pay, religious affiliation, or personal capacities (eg intellectual ability or behaviour). With the exception of the Catholic system which had both elite and poor parish schools, Australian private schools were largely concerned with the production and reproduction of privilege. They accomplished this through an adherence to the competitive academic curriculum, the ideology of merit, selection of students and families, and support for examinations and syllabi that required the cultural capitals of their dominant school populations. That is, as well heeled private institutions, they dominantly privileged the individual benefits of education and promoted a view of quality education not too dissimilar to that offered to the sons and daughters of the wealthy in late Victorian England.

This sharp distinction between public and private schools that existed up until the early 1970s and continued for a short time after the introduction of state aid was to undergo significant change in the next 30 years - change that altered the nature of the state aid debate.

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLING

The challenges presented by ‘globalisation’ marked a kind of nation-al institutional and symbolic ‘crisis’ in Australia from the mid 1970s when Australian industry began to feel the effects of international competition. By the mid 1980s, the federal government had little choice but to attend to the country’s declining exports and burgeoning imports, reductions in federal income derived from company taxation and increased budgetary pressure. A ready made policy problematisation and solution was at hand, and it was a federal Labor government that embraced the doctrine of world free trade, lowered tariffs, deregulated financial institutions and opened fiscal borders (Kelly, 1994). The Keynesian welfare state began to unravel in favour of the internationally popular policy agendas collectively known as neoliberalism. As with all areas of public provision, this shift in government policy had a dramatic impact on the nature of Australian public education and the relationship between public and private education.

From the late 1970s, there developed a continuing drift to private schools, suggesting that many parents were more interested in the apparent individual ‘advantages’ offered by private schools, than they were in the social and community benefits of education. During the 1980s and early 1990s the Federal Labor government, which attempted to combine neoliberal economic policies with social democratic social policies, tried to staunch the bleeding from the public system, largely produced by the introduction and then extension of state aid. Realising that abandoning state aid would be electorally disastrous, but concerned about the effects on public schools, the Labor government sought to maintain a primary obligation to public education through ‘planned educational provision’.

A key feature of this approach was an attempt to regulate the establishment of new private schools by introducing the New Schools policy. This limited the establishment of new schools or the relocation of old schools in areas where there was already established provision. Those wishing to start new private schools were required to show some evidence of need, demand and viability. But the new private schools were aimed at a new market - lower middle class and aspiring working class families – and this brought private schools directly into the same geographical areas as the bulk of state schools,
and into direct competition with the entire state system rather than just its upper echelons. While the New Schools policy may have slowed the drift to private schools, it did not stop it.

By the mid 1990s, the distinction between the public and private sectors that had been a key characteristic for much of the 20th century had been weakened. Government responsibility for educating Australian children was now shared between State owned and State regulated schools, and publicly subsidised private schools. The discourse of education as a public good was now openly challenged by a rival discourse of individual rights and choice where education was seen primarily as a 'positional good' (Marginson, 1997). Supporters of public education recognised that it was in danger of becoming a residualised system, a safety net for those who could not afford private education. This fear was to be sharpened with the election of the Howard government.

In 1996 after 13 years of federal Labour government, the Howard led Liberal party was elected to office, and embraced neo-liberalism. Joining similarly minded state governments, a raft of publicly owned enterprises were privatised, state and federal budgets and bureaucracies were savagely cut, and the private sector heavily subsidised to keep it operating within the country (Spohr, 1999). Some States have fared better than others in this regime. But levels of inequality have increased, and the middle class has reduced in size and become increasingly vulnerable to contractualism and work intensification. It has been suggested that Australia has the most flexible workforce in the OECD, with the highest levels of part time and casual employment (Pusey, 1998). A hard core of long term unemployed and underemployed are increasingly isolated in particular rural regions and city suburbs, while a lucky few enjoy the benefits of being part of successful global industries (Baum, Stimson, O'Connor, Mullins, & Davies, 1999).

The neoliberal project defines education as a private benefit. The Liberal government has deliberately sought to blur the distinction between public and private education and shift students away from public schools into the private sector. The ideology of privatisation, marketisation and parent choice is the justification for this federally stimulated growth of the private school sector and concomitant reduction in the size of the public schooling sector. Of course State governments retain responsibility for school education and have mediated this approach in various ways. But the reach of the Commonwealth has been wide. For example, early in its first term, the Liberal government abandoned Labor's New Schools policy in favour of funding any non-government school which met minimum State level requirements. That is, any new non-government school can be established without analysis of the impact on neighbouring schools, and with no minimum or maximum enrolment requirements. A supply-led system of private school provision has been instituted.

The growth of new schools, as noted earlier, accentuated the drift to private schools that had been occurring throughout the 1990s. In the ten years between 1990-2000, the number of students attending primary and secondary public schools increased by 1.8% while the number attending non-government schools increased by 11% (ABS, 2002a). By 2002 the proportion of students in government schools had dropped to 68.8%, a sharp contrast to the position 30 years earlier when the figure had stood at nearly 80% (ABS, 2002b). Many of the new schools are religious, and these run the gamut from Anglican to fundamentalist Christian, some are based in particular ethnic and cultural communities and religions (Greek colleges, Jewish colleges, Muslim colleges) and some spring from profound disillusion with public education (as in the schools in traditional Aboriginal home-lands). While some of these, which might be defined as 'community identity' schools, take as their aim the (re)production of a collective cultural/religious social group marginalised by mainstream white Australian society, others make the same appeals to the production of privilege as the continuing private school sector, while making a virtue out of their highly selective school population and their isolation from 'the public'.

One important outcome of this policy approach is that private school education has ceased to be simply the preserve of those with elite incomes, lifestyles and aspirations. Through policy-induced diversity of affordability and provision, private schooling has become 'organic' to a variety of classes, religious and ethnic fragments. There is now little doubt that, in Australian communities made vulnerable by the effects of macro and micro economic change and the neoliberal policy regime, many families equate the promises of privilege via private schooling with the possibility of their children having a greater competitive edge in uncertain times. With private education now within the grasp of more Australians, competition between public and private schools began to flourish. In such a market atmosphere and in a policy climate of self-managing schools, the wealthier public schools, with affluent communities capable of subsidising decreasing resource provision, are becoming even more differentiated from their public school peers. It is becoming increasingly problematic to talk of the public and private systems as though they are separate and homogenous entities. They are far more fractured than that.

The impact of these policies is wider than simply increasing numbers in private schools. They also have profound curriculum effects. As a response to competition in this education 'quasi-market', public secondary schools in particular now seek to differentiate themselves in the schooling landscape. Some public schools adopt uniforms, streaming and selection of students, and examination preparation as their ethic; some become very vocationally oriented; some offer particular subject specialisations such as music, hockey, ICTs or languages; and many flounder as they seek ways to remain comprehensive and cooperative with their public school peers (Thomson, 2002). The driving impetus for these changes is the competition with private schools and the fear that 'consumers' have a perception that democratic and equity imperatives are more important in public schools than sorting and selecting to produce 'quality', or 'standards'. In other words, state schools now have to be concerned not to be seen as lacking commitment to the (re) production of privilege! Nevertheless the ongoing sorting binary of 'heads versus hands' curriculum remains intact.

The policy pronouced 'globalisation crisis' brings schooling into particular focus. The demands of the new 'knowledge economy' have been interpreted by State and
federal governments of both persuasions to mean that global economic recovery is contingent upon a supply of well-educated human capital. As well, jobs for unskilled labour and the youth labour market have declined markedly, and there is a clear need to do more with young people who no longer can expect to leave school early and find a career. Families are increasingly anxious about the fate of the next generation and seek some ways of getting assurances that schooling will continue to provide social mobility and security. The push to keep more young people at school and to educate them to higher levels and in different things places under strain the school's role of sorting and selecting.

Simultaneously, the modernist institutional 'grammar of schooling' (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) which has survived the shift in governance from the state to the site, is increasingly under strain. In Australia, as elsewhere, the durability of the hierarchised age-grade-subject architecture produces a crisis of 'structure' which, in the marketised environment promoted by the neoliberal policy trajectories of federal and state governments, is perpetuated rather than deconstructed. State schooling is increasingly in/out of step with young people and the demands of the new cultures and economic order(s). Many young people now work while at school and combine various kinds of training, education and work in a kind of early adult/protracted adolescence. School timetables, education via cohort and even the school day are asynchronous with their lives (Dwyer & Wynn, 2001). Popular ICT based pedagogies and youth cultures provide knowledges and resources that are slow to be taken up in formal school activities, making school a dull place to be (Kenway & Bullen, 2001).

However these challenges are far from the purview of policymakers. State and federal governments of both political parties are immersed in 'audit cultures' (Strathern, 2000) and attempt to turn educational uncertainties into manageable risks through an edifice of rational planning (Clarke, 1999). Students have become 'performing outcomes', parents are seen as 'consumers' and teachers are now the means by which targets and test scores are achieved. In this situation, public education in Australia in particular increasingly approaches a 'non-place' (Auge, 1995) in which the trend is that identities, relations and histories are under erasure. This fails to address the challenges to the public education system from the ongoing production of privilege via the private school sector and the increasing inadequacy of curriculum and school operations to meet the needs and lives of young people. In such a policy environment, what are the options for public education?

**PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA IN 2002: CHALLENGING DOMINANT DISCOURSES**

We have argued that since 1996 the intensification of the neo-liberal educational policy frame has reoriented schooling to being primarily about education as a private self investment. Consumption has become the operating motif, replacing notions of collective service and the public good. In community discourse, the question has shifted from what can education do for us, to what can education do for me? This discursive climate legitimates education policy trajectories which blur the boundaries of public and private systems in the name of competition and choice, and privileges the notion of user pays as an operating principle for educational provision in Australia. One consequence of this neo-liberal discourse is to construct Commonwealth funding of private schools as natural and therefore inevitable. Other consequences are emerging as public schools work to survive in a market environment, and these consequences are reinforcing and extending social and educational inequalities in ways we have outlined above.

And yet, despite these significant shifts and challenges, the Australian public/private debate is still being conducted within the old paradigm through the use of dominant and traditional rhetorics. Familiar phrases and positions are uttered and fail to take effect. In our view, there needs to be a circuit breaker. The public/private debate must be placed within the context of the changing circumstances of a globalising world, and address the inequities wrought by the neo-liberal policy regime. For this to happen there need to be more nuanced understandings of the nature and limitations of the current dominant discourses. It is to that task we now turn.

During the 2001 federal elections, which returned the conservative Howard government for a third term, the continued sponsorship of private education became a central issue. A particular focus of debate was on a new funding mechanism for private schools based on where parents of school children live, rather than on the cost of attending the school. This so called socio-economic status funding model which was legislated in mid-2001, ignores the existing level of resources of private schools, the concentration of particular social, cultural and financial capitals in individual schools, and their capacity to raise additional funds. One of its by products has been to make the wealthiest private schools in Australia (that is, the former Category 1 schools) better off by an average of nearly $1 million each over four years. In addition, a private deal was struck with the Catholic system which provided an extra $100 million per annum for the next four years to Catholic schools (Davidson, 2001, p. 17). All of this confirmed the imbalance of Commonwealth funding to private schools: by 2005 it is estimated that public schools with 68% of students will receive 32.2% of Commonwealth funds, while private schools with 32% of students will receive 67.8% of Commonwealth funds to schools (Martin & Fitzgerald, 2000, p. 47).

Not surprisingly, there were protests from the public schools lobby and the issue of state aid was back on centre stage. During the election campaign, the debate was fierce, sometimes fuelled by provocative actions such as the few principals of wealthy private schools who sent letters to parents warning them that they would face a fee increase under a Labour government. The obsession of a few elite schools with rifle ranges, swimming pools and small class sizes receiving more, while many state schools in high poverty areas struggled to pay for computers and curtains, provided an irresistible target for public school supporters who overlooked the aspirations and anxieties of large numbers of families sending their children to nearby newly created low fee schools. And the federal government defended its new funding approach from the criticisms of giving
more to those who already had by pointing to the ‘community identity’ schools, and in particular those which were owned by remote indigenous communities.

But from the smoke and mirrors of media-led polemic, it was possible to identify some familiar orthodoxies redolent of previous times. These have framed, and continue to frame, the public/private education debate in Australia.

**Public education orthodoxies**

The public education lobby, including ourselves, focus largely on the issue of funding. There appear to be at least three major rhetorical positions along a continuum. At one end are the minimalists who simply argue against additional funding for the wealthiest private schools. This was the stance taken by the Labor Party during the 2001 election campaign. At the other end are a small minority, most obviously represented by the radical activist group DOGS (the Defence of Government Schools), who argue for the removal of all public funding for private schools. Somewhere near the centre of the continuum are those groups like the Australian Education Union who argue for a recasting of funding formulae so that Commonwealth funding is organised on a per capita basis, an approach which would effectively reverse the current allocative model.

What these positions have in common are a set of assumptions about public education as a public good and as a nation-building institution: as a foundation of Australian democracy, an arena for social cohesion, an avenue for social mobility, and a tool for economic growth. They also assume that the public and private systems are homogenous entities. In the new environment it is argued, public schools are in danger of becoming residualised, places for those who do not have the financial or cultural capital to choose a private education. Public education must be properly funded if it is to fulfill its nation-building purposes.

In our view, these familiar refrains are inadequate. In particular they:

- are usually based on a romantic vision of a free public education system that never was;
- promote an idealised version of democracy that fails to come to terms with questions of pluralised and multiple identities;
- fail to recognize that variations in wealth and resources of schools are as apparent within the public system as between public and private schools;
- do not appreciate that it is not only the white middle class who are choosers in the education market: there are increasing numbers of diverse families placing their children in private schools; and
- focus primarily on funding formulae and sectors of schooling while neglecting fundamental curriculum questions about the nature of knowledge in a multicultural society, and how the dominant competitive academic curriculum continues to reproduce patterns of inequality and privilege.

**Private education orthodoxies**

The private education lobbies continue to use old mantras about personal freedoms, although there has been a shift from collective arguments about religious groups having the freedom to establish schools for their children, to ones which emphasise individual freedom of educational choice. Either way, they maintain that those who decide to send their children to private schools are also taxpayers and are therefore worthy of public support. In the last election some argued that they would be disadvantaged via a vis parents who chose to send their children to state schools if they did not receive their ‘share’ of public taxation income (see Thomson, 2002, Ch 5). Some even hinted that parents who could afford to send their children to private school and didn’t want somehow cheating the system. More pragmatically, the private schools peak bodies have argued that private schools save State and Federal governments the full cost of providing and maintaining schools; that state aid helps to reduce the fees of private schools thus making them more widely available; and that since state governments dominantly fund public schools, the balance should be reversed at the federal level.

In our view these familiar refrains are inadequate. In particular they:

- privilege the individual purposes of education, failing to come to grips with public purposes;
- gloss over the difference amongst private schools;
- fail to address questions of accountability for public funds;
- fail to acknowledge the deep dependence of private schools on publicly funded activities such as teacher education, curriculum development and professional development;
- fail to acknowledge that educational choice is available to some people and not others;
- refuse to recognise the selection of families and students on which their claims to quality are based; and
- support an ultimately inefficient supply led system in which there will inevitably be winner and losers among both public and private schools, with a wastage of taxpayer dollars and adverse individual family effects.

**A new orthodoxy: the no-difference story:**

During the Howard years since 1996, a new and third proposition has begun to jostle for equal space with the two dominant positions. We have called this the ‘no difference story’ (Reid & Thomson, 2001) because its proponents suggest that since public and private schools offer much the same curriculum and increasingly have to meet national performance benchmarks there is little point in maintaining a distinction between them. The logic of the no difference approach is that for funding purposes all schools should be
treated as though they are the same. To the common funders, that is the state and the federal governments who care only about outcomes not provision nor governance, all providers are equal (Thomson, 1998). This stance is reinforced by the centrality of the concept of choice to contemporary educational policy.

It is argued that healthy competition between the sectors will lead ultimately to a more diverse and better quality education system. The ‘no difference’ advocates maintain that the agitation for more money for public schools is simply maintaining an outdated division (Angus, 1996; Pascoe, 1996). Radical forms of the ‘no difference’ story are represented in proposals for deregulation and voucher systems (Caldwell & Roskam, 2002). That such a position is credible in the public arena is evident from the distance travelled in 40 years since the first tentative steps towards state aid were made by the Commonwealth in 1964.

In our view there are a number of significant problems with the ‘no difference’ and equality story. In particular they:

- ignore legislation that requires state schools to take all comers while private schools can be selective thus creating inbuilt inequalities;
- suggest rather glibly that the greater levels of autonomy of private schools should be the measure for public schools rather than the reverse;
- allow private schools to operate with different standards of fiscal transparency;
- fail to acknowledge that state schools must offer schooling to all regardless of their locality, physical and mental abilities and personal histories and that this places greater cost and professional demands on the state systems; and
- gloss over the fact that education is a major public policy lever which is only effective because there is a substantive public education system through which not only educational changes but also broader social outcomes can be effected.

In reality then, there are substantive differences between the two sectors of schooling that make their rhetorical treatment as equal, fundamentally unfair and unjust.

These three orthodoxies – the public, the private and the no difference story - are clearly inadequate as we have shown. Yet what can we put in their place?

TOWARDS A NEW DISCOURSE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION

The usual response to the conundrum of how to defend public education, and one we have adopted ourselves, is to urge that the strengths and successes of public education should be promoted more effectively and to propose a democratic process to respond to current challenges. In a previous local publication we have argued for a national forum to discuss the purposes of public education, and for the national teacher union to take leadership of the debates (Reid & Thomson, 1998). In another more recent publication we attempt to promote some conversation about new models of public sector funding, accountability, governance and curriculum among those who support public schooling (Reid & Thomson, forthcoming). However this kind of promotion and process response seems inadequate in the face of the considerable support able to be marshalled for the continued escalation of private school funding.

While we still believe that some kind of national debate about public education is necessary, we also think that the critique of neoliberal government policy intentions and directions needs to be sharpened. As we advanced the analysis in this paper we located four key internal pressure points in the pro-private school agenda:

(1) the inherent irrationality of supply led funding

It is difficult to think of another case where a private or community enterprise can receive large amounts of government subsidy without providing substantive evidence of demand and a plan for self sufficiency and viability. Yet this is precisely the situation for those wishing to start new private schools. With just a handful of demonstrated supporters and a scanty business plan, private school entrepreneurs are able to leverage federal funding for capital works and annual income. Government subsidies of this kind constitute an interference in the market that is clearly at odds with the neoliberal claims about hands-off government, albeit one that is consistent with the use of the market to control ‘producers’ (Reid & Thomson, 1998). Here is a possible internal pressure point. Since an education quasi-market inevitably produces winners and losers, a government that supports such a subsidy system may be vulnerable to charges that irrational, ideologically driven supply-led funding for private schools is placing taxpayer funds at risk.

(2) the double standards of accountability

Private school advocates argue that private schools are accountable primarily to the churches or the legally constituted bodies that own them, and to the parents that contribute to the cost of running them. They have a lesser accountability to their other major funders, the federal and state governments. Governments have accepted this argument. The Catholic school sector has been the exception to this and it has chosen to take on nearly all of the same accountability measures as the state systems. In exchange for government funding, private schools are required to demonstrate very little in relation to efficiency and effectiveness, and nothing in relation to equity.

This accountability vacuum may not have been a problem when relatively small amounts of public money were at stake. However, now that individual private schools are in receipt of considerable amounts of tax payer funds (many receive well over two million dollars per triennium) it is literally incredible that a neoliberal government, which requires strong centrally controlled audit and accountability requirements of all those who receive public money in all other spheres (from general practitioners and private hospitals to employment intermediaries and private training providers), can still maintain this stance. It represents another pressure point, with the government being
vulnerable to charges of negligence, favoritism and hypocrisy. This is not to support forms of accountability that are clearly educationally counterproductive. It will continue to be important to assess which accountability mechanisms can best deliver educational, rather than market, ends.

(3) the potential to de-homogenise the private school sector

As we have suggested, the private school sector in Australia is not simply the same. There are high fee schools whose mission is the ongoing promotion of privilege; aggressively expanding low fee religious systemic schools that ape their wealthier betters and promise class mobility via the competitive academic curriculum; and fundamentalist schools via which families seek to immure their children from the general public. But there are also private schools whose social justice concerns and notion of public good are not dissimilar to the views held by social democrats. These include poor Catholic parish schools, traditional Aboriginal schools in remote self managing homelands, small community schools organised around alternative teaching methods, and ‘community identity’ schools such as the Jewish, Muslim and Greek Orthodox schools in which a collective notion of society and culture exists. Interestingly in the post 9/11 world, Muslim schools in particular have engaged in extensive interactions with local state schools, as the dangers of separation from the general community become apparent.

There is no doubt that the continued use of the binary public/private has worked against the public system, and continues to do so. The discursive homogenisation of the private school sector has allowed the federal Liberal government to defend itself against the charges of promoting privilege by using the ‘community identity’ schools as its shield. Michael Apple (Apple, 2001; Apple & Oliver, 1996) has ably demonstrated the negative consequences for the left of discursively uniting the ‘right’ in the United States, and the progressive possibilities of working productively with fractions of it. This is an avenue largely unexplored in Australia, and one worthy of serious consideration by public school advocates. At the same time, there will be need to address the resource disparities within the public system.

(4) the weakening of the state school system as a policy lever

As it currently stands, both state and federal governments are reluctant to interfere in the governance of any of the private schools, and reluctant to use their substantive funding as a lever. So, when governments make education policy they make it for the public school sector. They then seek to negotiate with the various private schools systems and peak bodies to have these policies adopted in the private sector. They are not always successful in this. At present only the Catholic and state systems of education are involved in national literacy and numeracy benchmarks. Despite vociferous arguments that the acceptance of public money should oblige recipients to adhere to public policy, the two tiers of government have failed to persuade all other fractions of the private school sector to comply.

This leaves governments stuck in a policy contradiction. On the one hand there is the spectre of a neoliberal federal government asserting that the only way to economic recovery is via a well educated population committed to work for Australia’s security. This is the justification for the development of national ‘basic’ literacy and numeracy performance benchmarks, a national system of vocational training and a push for citizenship education. On the other hand, as the state school systems are impoverished and diminished through the policy of public funding for private schools, so the government’s capacity to design and deliver on this public policy agenda in education is also weakened. And the more federal Ministers castigate the public system and advocate choice, the more they encourage the drift to private schools and the transmogrification of education to an individual benefit, then the less they are able to focus schooling towards any national agenda, even if it is a predominantly an economic one. This contradiction contains the potential to produce a substantive legitimation crisis for government, and so represents another possible pressure point.

These four pressure points open up possibilities not only for a more targeted defence of public schools, but also for a possibly re-configured notion of the public system as one that is fully accountable, inclusive, equitable, representative of the diversity of Australian collective community identities and committed to the public good. The argument that public moneys should not fuel the (re)production of privilege would have more force.

While it may not be popular to suggest that some of those schools now in the private system could become part of a new public education system - those that support collective ‘community identity’ and the parish Catholic schools committed to social justice are examples here - it may be a useful intervention in the current discursive hiatus. For a start it neatly isolates those schools whose prime mission is the (re)production of privilege. In addition, such a proposition could be accompanied by a stringent critique of the inherent contradictions in supply-led, unaccountable public funding as weakening the capacity of government to make effective public policy. In combination, these strategies may be disruptive of what currently appears to be an inexorable increase in private schooling and diminution of the public.

CONCLUSION

In our view current Commonwealth policy in relation to state aid to private schools fails to come to grips with the public purposes of education, emphasising individual purposes and shoring up privileges for elites. We believe such a policy trajectory cannot be justified: it is unjust and must be challenged. However, the defence of public education cannot be sustained by basing arguments on a mythical golden age. Not only does such a stance mask the ways in which public schools have also contributed to the (re)production of educational and social inequalities, but it is an easy target for slick neoliberal rhetoric relating to the strength of the market and the power of individual choice. It also serves to unite various groups who use private education. We have argued that a more productive strategy for proponents of public education might be to focus on the
many tensions and contradictions that exist in neo-liberal policy, and to work with those
groups currently located within the terrain of ‘private’ education who have a
commitment to a fairer society. For us, one of the fundamental challenges facing Australia
is to preserve the notion of public education as a public good, even while the concept of
‘public good’ is reshaped to account for the changing circumstances and diversity of a
nation-state functioning in a globalising world.

NOTES

1 We thank Lyndsay Connors for reminding us of the importance of this issue.

2 This is one manifestation of an inherent contradiction in neoliberalism which promotes both
rampant individualism and strong centralism.

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