

If we forget history

The thirty year war against public education



Maurie Mulheron



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NSW Teachers Federation
Eric Pearson Study Grant

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(Front cover: Education under attack: left: the New South Wales Teachers Federation's mass protests against the public education 'reforms' of the NSW Greiner government; top right: US President Ronald Reagan on his schools offensive; bottom: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in a classroom)

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Foreword

Eric Pearson was President of the NSW Teachers Federation from 1974 to 1975. He was also President of the Australian Teachers Federation. He commenced his teaching career in small country schools as a two-year trained teacher prior to active service in New Guinea and Borneo during the Second World War. He subsequently returned to teaching and further study and received a PHD from London University. He had a distinguished teaching and lecturing career, and was head of the department of education at Sydney Teachers College. He died on June 8, 1977.

Originally called the Eric Pearson Memorial Travel Grant, the Eric Pearson Study Grant was established as a fitting tribute to his outstanding contribution as a scholar and unionist.

The first award was made in 1980 to Gus Plater, a teacher and activist from Armidale Teachers Association who investigated the social impact of microprocessor technology and its impact on schools and unions.

Areas of investigation since then have covered the range of issues affecting teachers and the role of the union. Examples include the study by John Fisher (2005) to examine protective factors in schools to reduce crime by students at risk. Vivienne Harling (2006) wrote *The impact of on-going training and development for teachers of students with disabilities*. In 2007 Kerry Barlow wrote *Comparative study of TAFE NSW teachers and further education lecturers in the United Kingdom, in relation to continuing professional development*. Dianne Butland's report on *Testing Times: Global trends in marketisation of public education through accountability testing* was published in 2008.

In 2007 Annual Conference endorsed the *Dignity and Respect in the Workplace Charter*; this was followed by a report by Joan Lemaire in 2009 entitled *Bullying: Making the employer manage the risks*. Nicole Calnan wrote *Teachers' professional development: it is union work* in 2010.

The investigations arising from the Eric Pearson Study Grant have contributed significantly to the work and ongoing development of the NSW Teachers Federation.

I congratulate Maurie for his contribution, *If we forget history*.

Jenny Diamond
General Secretary

“If we forget history, we are only a convulsive twitch to today’s media output. That output is false, bad and works to blot out yesterday’s reality. The struggle is always the same; the ultimate goal is always the same; but the currents, the cast, the emphases, the disguises change.”

Emile de Antonio

Preface

When public education served to reinforce a conservative view of the state based on obedience and compliance, and could reproduce class, it was generally supported by powerful elites. But in the period following the Second World War there was a massive expansion of public education systems fuelled by a combination of economic growth, post-war optimism and the resultant baby boom. Consequently education levels steadily rose, reflecting greater participation and increased retention rates.

This coincided with determined efforts to pressure governments to protect its citizens from the worst excesses of the market as experienced during the Depression.

Many saw that public education could be a powerful democratising force.

By the 1960s this democratic spirit was reflected in structural changes such as the expansion of comprehensive secondary schooling and new curriculum that started to encourage more critical thinking. More and more, the public school was seen as a social space, owned collectively, where barriers related to race, gender and class were, if not broken down, at least questioned.

But almost immediately the pushback began. Public education systems came under sustained attack and a narrative of crisis and failure was developed. This has led to more than thirty years of conservative “reform” that is determined to weaken universal provision and protect advantage. The education “reform” movement must be seen for what it is: a movement that is profoundly anti-democratic.

The market seems to dominate all aspects of life, with boundaries between public and private breaking down. Around the globe there is an increasing use of market mechanisms to drive social policy. Schooling appeared to be one area immune from this. But this is no longer the case. It is in this broader context that the political attacks on public education should be seen.

Our responsibility is to ensure that we remember the history of the education wars being waged against public education so that we may understand the present and shape the future. That is the least we owe the next generation of teachers.

MM

Why us?

Perhaps if Jean-François de Galaup La Pérouse had been a little less tardy in arriving at Botany Bay in late January 1788, Australian teachers today might have been spared the worst of a range of educational “reforms” that dominate much of the policy formations throughout the English-speaking world. Australian politicians spent most of the twentieth century making sure Australia followed either the United Kingdom or the United States into their military conflicts, from the Boer War to the Gulf. And so it should be no surprise that, when it comes to the “education wars” of the last thirty years, the habits of slavish adherence to the doctrines of these two countries would continue.

Much of what passes as educational policy in this country is imported from either the UK or the US, sometimes with the obligatory footnote acknowledging the source, but mostly plagiarised. If we have learned anything about globalisation it is that national boundaries are mostly irrelevant as large corporations, with no geographic centre or, indeed, national loyalty, can now purchase policy and policy-makers just about anywhere, notwithstanding phone hacking scandals that sometimes expose their spheres of influence.

The role played by these two influential English-speaking countries was to develop national education policy settings that would reflect, serve and be subordinate to dominant neo-liberal economic doctrines. International agencies and inter-governmental bodies ensured that what had started as national agendas, created by politically conservative governments, would change education systems all around the world, with few countries spared.

Indeed, history could well judge these as seriously undemocratic times. National and state governments come and go yet policy directions remain constant, particularly in relation to schooling. And the absolute policy constant has been that there should be a dramatic contraction in the public sector. For teachers who work in public schools, and their unions, this has automatically put them in the line of sight of policy-makers.

Confronted with a new policy enthusiasm that, more often than not, bears no relation to their reality, teachers in Australia and elsewhere could not be blamed for asking: who thought of that? Why us?

This paper is a modest attempt to answer those questions by sketching the historical origins of many of the political agendas that public school teachers face.

It is worth gaining some understanding the origins of educational policy in both the US and the UK and why to this day this still influences policy-makers in Australia. The broader

global education agenda is based on the contention that educational improvement will evolve by competition and the application of market forces through parental choice along with business management and performance accountability mechanisms. The speed at which this ideology shifts across borders has been described as an “epidemic”.¹

Heavily influenced by large corporations, dominant media players and conservative think-tanks using a new managerial language from a lexicography compiled by business schools, political parties implement policies that are designed to end the “state monopoly”. No matter what the service, and often in defiance of public opinion, this ideology is applied to public provision including postal and communication services, transport, roads, shipping ports, airports, health care, welfare, prisons, security services, employment services, housing, utilities such as water and energy and, of course, education.

Ideas are never neutral. Many adherents of the new orthodoxies neglect to acknowledge the birthplace of these ideas. Yet, a study of the ideological DNA of these policies reveals deeply conservative publications, shadowy think-tanks and links to the politics of the Right that date back generations.

The conservative agenda for public education appears complex and all-encompassing, with numerous fronts having opened up including:

- The fragmentation and privatisation of the public school system through Charter Schools, Academies, Trust Schools (USA and UK), Free Schools, and the creation of specialist and selective schools;
- The devolution agenda marketed under a variety of names such as “school-based management”, “school autonomy”, “independent public schools”, or “principal empowerment”.
- Funding cuts to public schools, growth in vouchers and the proliferation of government-funded private providers;
- The high-stakes testing agenda, the stigmatising of public schools, school closures, teacher and principal sackings;
- The politicisation of school curriculum, sidelining the professional voice of teachers and marginalising certain subjects;
- Loss of tenure;
- Teacher salary cuts and wage freezes reinforced by “performance”, “bonus” or “merit” pay;
- An attack on teaching qualifications through programs such as *Teach for America* and, in Australia, *Teach Next*.
- Employing non-educators in leadership positions; and,
- The demonising of public school teachers and their unions.

Underpinning all this is a deeply held belief that there is little role for government to play in providing services to the public. As a former federal minister for education in Australia argued, “If you can find suppliers of a particular service in the Yellow Pages you may ask, why is the government providing it?”²

In the UK, we see a longing by conservative forces to recreate a laissez faire approach reminiscent of an earlier Britain when the modern state barely existed. The market is paramount, largely unfettered by regulation, and control of those government services that cannot be privatised is devolved. Politically this involves starving the public service of adequate funding, then demonising the resultant shortcomings. A more recent and disturbing development in the UK is a new form of attack where the provision of social service is ceded to volunteers, be they religious groups or charities. In the UK this is known as the “Big Society”, and the language used to market it is seductive:

“The UK’s ‘Big Society’ [policy] appeals to widely-held values about citizen empowerment, co-production, diversity and community autonomy while implementing changes that have transferred public wealth to corporations, disempowered non-government organisations and weakened the public sector. These changes have coincided with two national budgets that have slashed public sector funding, resulting in massively reduced local government budgets and community sector funding and the retrenchment of hundreds of thousands of public servants.”³

Unlike the UK, the US had a much less developed welfare apparatus to dismantle. In many respects, it could be argued that Senator Joe McCarthy and others whipped up anti-communist hysteria in the 1950s to silence those liberals and political centrists who sought a fairer and more egalitarian America. That grotesque period of US history may have been as much a reaction to the policies of the 1930s New Deal, which for conservatives smacked of socialism and “welfarism”, as it was about unearthing communist conspiracies.⁴ More recently, we saw it played out in the extraordinary reaction by powerful vested interests and Tea Party political fundamentalists to the modest healthcare legislation of the Obama administration.

American political thought has always centred on the myth of the hardworking individual whose talents alone would lead to financial success and happiness once government got out of the way. This myth has always dominated political thinking in the US, perhaps reflecting the nation’s origins of being founded by religious refugees who escaped persecution by boarding the Mayflower.

This ideology is now reflected in extremist political groups such as the Tea Party that divide the American population into “makers and takers”, the former, it is argued, being businessmen who create opportunity and the latter the rest of the population is that takes whatever government provides. But we get ahead of ourselves.

In developing our understanding of where Australia fits into this agenda it would be useful to explore some of the origins of the so-called “education reform” agenda, or as Pasi Sahlberg, the Finnish educator describes it, the Global Education Reform Movement or G.E.R.M. Why did Australia get infected?

“Public schools are the best they have ever been. Public schools create skills, life chances and opportunities better than they ever have. Public schools have more highly talented and effective teachers than they ever have. Public schools are happy and successful places full of the joy of life and learning. The public school system is in modest but accelerating decline. Something in this tale does not add up.”⁵

Indeed, something in this tale does not add up. Why is it that our public school systems in this country have been subjected to seemingly perpetual criticism and radical experimentation?

What follows is a sketch, a not-too-complete history, of some of the significant milestones along this path over the last thirty to forty years. This paper attempts to put the current educational policies into an historical context. It focuses on the structural changes to public education and does not attempt to explore in any detail the attacks on curriculum and pedagogy such as the “history wars” or the false “phonics versus whole language” argument.

As a starting point, we might visit the US in the era of Ronald Reagan — the 1980s — before crossing the Atlantic to Thatcher's Britain. Most of the ideas now dominating educational policy in Australia emanate from a time of leg-warmers, shoulder pads, parachute pants and mullets; when The Captain and Tennille's hit single “Do That To Me One More Time” topped the charts, when *Cats* was about to open in the West End and *The Empire Strikes Back* was packing them into cinemas everywhere.

Notes

- 1 Verger, Antoni; Altinyelken, H K; Koning, M [eds] (2013) p1 *Global Managerial Education Reforms and Teachers* Education International Research Institute
- 2 Kemp, David quoted in Dr James Whelan (May 2012) p 57, *Big Society and Australia -How the U.K. Government is dismantling the state and what it means for Australia*. Centre for Policy Development
- 3 Dr James Whelan (May 2012) p 6, *op cit*.
- 4 See Jeff Sharlet (2008) *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of America* Power and Howard Zinn (Revised 2010) *A People's History of the United States*.
- 5 Denis Fitzgerald, (2013) p8 *Taking the Lead* (NSWTF)

An Empire at Risk

“If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have well viewed it as an act of war.”⁶

There has always been a propensity for commentators to don rose-coloured spectacles and look to a golden age of education. Usually, but not always, this seems to correspond with roughly the dozen or so years that they were at school.

Indeed, it seems quite common for some to reflect that educational decline began the very year they left school. The problem is that this habit is as old as schooling itself. Perhaps it began in ancient Greece around 400BC in the time of Socrates who complained that,

“Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannise their teachers.”

Or when Shakespeare keenly observed during the reign of Elizabeth 1,

“... the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school”

Perhaps it was about sixty years ago, in 1953, when Arthur Eugene Bestor Jr wrote his famous work, *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Public Schools*,

“[Educators have] lowered the aims of the American public schools [by] setting forth purposes for education so trivial as to forfeit the respect of thoughtful men, and by deliberately divorcing the schools from the disciplines of science and scholarship.”⁷

The use of the phrase “retreat from learning” by Bestor was, of course, used to insinuate something lost.⁸

But what if education standards have not been in steady decline? What if the need for an “education reform” movement was based on faulty evidence? What if the educational crisis was actually manufactured? What if most major “reforms” foisted on public schools in Australia and other countries in recent decades were based on lies?

(The redefining of every government policy as a “reform” is the first deceit, of course. Although it was a word that originally meant “improvement” it is now often used in political discourse as a synonym for restructures that often lead to deregulation and privatisation.)

There seems to be a universal acceptance that 1983 was a watershed year in the debate

about “falling standards”, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform*, the report of then President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. Despite it being a short paper, 36 pages in length, it is arguably the most influential report on education ever written in the US. Its impact is still being felt today, not only in that country but across the world.

Terrel Howard Bell had been the National Commissioner of Education from 1974–76 under the Republican administrations of Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. He was well-placed, therefore, to become secretary of education in Reagan’s cabinet.

During the 1980 presidential election campaign, however, Reagan had promised to abolish the Federal Department of Education if elected. He was thwarted as president from implementing this because of Democrats in Congress.⁹ To this day it is still a policy objective of the Republicans and many conservative think-tanks to abolish the Federal Department of Education, claiming it is a bureaucracy that is a waste of money and intrudes on the lives of Americans. (While Reagan was criticising the US Department of Education for waste, he increased the defence budget during his presidency by a massive 35 per cent).

Along with the call for the abolition of the Education Department, Reagan’s two other educational policies called for the introduction of daily prayers into public schools and tax credits for private tuition.

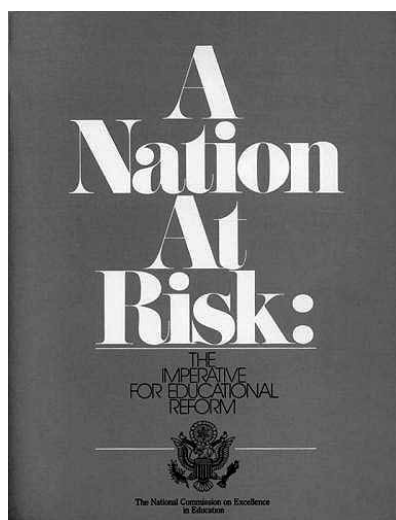
Against this backdrop of antipathy toward the department, the Reagan administration established an eighteen-member National Commission on Excellence in Education to be chaired by David Pierpont Gardner. The members of the commission were drawn from government, education and business circles. Terrel Bell used his position as secretary of education to appoint all members, so the commission was heavily influenced by Bell from the outset. He already believed that the public education system was failing America — in particular, threatening the dominant status of the US in the world economy.

In essence, the commission was charged with the responsibility for assessing the quality of teaching and learning at elementary, secondary and tertiary levels. As well, it was to compare American schools and colleges with other advanced nations. This second priority was of deep political significance, born during the post-war period in US history.

Now, it is worth recalling Reagan began his political career during the 1950s as a Cold War warrior. Soon after being elected president of the Screen Actors Guild he became an FBI informant and condemned countless artists, writers, directors and fellow actors to unemployment by having their names added to the infamous blacklist.

Reagan and his advisers would have clearly remembered an event that occurred on October 4, 1957. That was the day the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite in space. It was an event that shook American confidence to the core.

The launch was clearly a technological and scientific triumph for the Russians. The last frontier, Space, was being explored, not by the US but by the Soviets. Since the start of the Cold War the political strategists and the generals had seen American public schools as





Sputnik, the real spoiler (left). The Sputnik crisis allowed the military to scapegoat public education

having a two-fold purpose: the reinforcement of allegiance to the US political system and, of course, the nursery for the engineers, physicists and mathematicians who would give the US the technological advantage over the Soviet Union and the rest of the world.

Sputnik was a real spoiler. President Dwight D. Eisenhower later referred to it as “the Sputnik crisis”. The satellite’s launch became a “told you so” moment for critics of public schools. There was little surprise that military leaders and conservative politicians blamed public education for the humiliation. Clearly, US public schools had failed the nation. The man who went on to develop the nuclear naval program, Admiral Hyman Rickover, even wrote a book on the topic in 1959 entitled *Education and Freedom* in which he argued that “only the massive upgrading of the scholastic standards of our schools will guarantee the future prosperity and freedom of the Republic”.¹⁰ Four years later, he followed this up with another book, *American Education: A National Failure* (1963).

We need to remember that this period of US history has been labelled the “frightened Fifties”. Lee Hays of *The Weavers* was prone to say, “nostalgia ain’t what it used to be” and popular culture has developed a narrative that sees the 1950s as a period of “happy days”, jukeboxes and teenage culture. Of course, it was. But for many the era was oppressive: writers were jailed, passports were confiscated, leftists were expelled from trade unions, Hollywood was being suffocated by the blacklist, artists went into exile and political dissent was stifled. In short, more than one million Americans had files opened on them by the FBI which infiltrated organisations, tapped phones, opened mail and followed people.

So claims that schools were failing the nation and leaving it vulnerable to attack exploited existing fears. How frightened was the nation? Ask any adult who went to school in the US in the 1950s to describe the nuclear attack drills where young children were taught to dive under their desks at the sounding of an alarm.

Of course, previous US presidential commissions on education had been established. The first such report had been commissioned by Harry Truman. It had concentrated on higher education with its findings published in 1947 as the *Higher Education for American De-*

mocracy. Subsequently, other presidential reports on education were commissioned including Eisenhower's 1956 *Committee on Education Beyond the High School* and, four years later, John F. Kennedy's *Task Force on Education*.

Although all these reports were heavily influenced by the Cold War political imperative of the need to maintain US political and economic hegemony, none had the impact or influence of *A Nation at Risk*, published by the Reagan administration. Indeed, the *A Nation at Risk* report was later dubbed by some as the “paper Sputnik”.



Terrel Bell, US Secretary of Education

What distinguished the *A Nation at Risk* report from others was its language and tone. Bell hired professional writers. Consequently, its pages were peppered with emotive language, hyperbole and rhetorical flourishes. Terms such as “rising tide of mediocrity”, “act of war” and “threatens our very future” were purpose-made for headline writers.

“The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

The very words in the title of the report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, “a nation at risk”, exploited national insecurity,

“Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged pre-eminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by our competitors throughout the world...”

Perhaps it was too inconvenient to mention that public school educated scientists had successfully landed men on the moon fourteen years earlier.

Apart from its extraordinary use of language *A Nation at Risk* was the first significant report that triggered a response from those who questioned the very existence of public schools. It can be argued that public schools in the US have been in retreat ever since. This is why it was such a far-reaching report.

As could be expected, the initial responses to the report were calls for additional resources. But these voices were drowned out by others who called for a radical restructuring of the schooling system. These groups developed a broader agenda based on the contention that educational improvement would evolve by competition and the application of market forces through parental choice underpinned by business management and performance accountability mechanisms.

Upon receipt of the report, Ronald Reagan thanked the commissioners at a ceremony held at the White House. He said he was particularly grateful that the report had endorsed his policies on school prayers, vouchers and the elimination of the Department of Education. The only problem is that the report made no mention of any of these policies at all: the words “prayers” and “vouchers” do not appear anywhere in the document. While the president was launching a report that argued that almost 40 per cent of 17-year-olds tested could not successfully “draw inferences from written material”, it was clear that he had not even read the report, let alone drawn any inferences from it.

What is surprising about the report is its lack of academic rigour. Much of the report is anecdotal and rhetorical, as can be seen from this extract:

“History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when American’s destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilisations.”



Ronald Reagan visiting schools after the release of *A Nation At Risk*

The report relied on some test scores that had been collected from 1963 to 1980. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT – changed in 1990 to Scholastic Assessment Test) comprises standardised tests used for college entry. *A Nation at Risk* claimed that SAT scores had declined during the period analysed. It was a central claim that shocked America, vindicating, it would appear, the critics of public schools.

While some advisers to Reagan such as noted “neo-con” Edwin Meese III attempted to get the US president to reject the report on the grounds that it would lead to a larger federal Department of Education, others saw that political capital that could be made. Reagan went on to make more than fifty “time-to-get-tough-on-education” speeches during his second term of office. The media fell into line, generally uncritically, running hundreds of stories across the country upon release of the report.¹¹ More than 500,000 copies of the report were distributed, and within four months of its release it had become the subject of more than 700 articles in 45 major newspapers.¹²

The times were right for the notion of a “crisis” in education to be broadly accepted. Americans had seen the dream of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “Great Society” – a set of social programs launched in the 1960s that were designed to eliminate poverty and racism – destroyed by the Vietnam War. Attempts to desegregate schools through bussing had led to a middle-class “white flight” from many inner-city schools. The oil crisis of 1973–74 rocked the US economy, with the resulting inflation eroding the incomes of American workers. The trauma of the Watergate crisis, the resignation of Nixon and his pardon by Ford also led to a crisis of confidence for many Americans in public institutions. The recession of the early 1980s caused even more social dislocation.

A Nation at Risk was able to shift the blame for the economic, political and social crises facing America to one institution: public education. It was spectacularly successful in scapegoating teachers and public schools. There is very little wonder that political conservatives and corporate America formed an alliance that has endured to this day. And testing data would become the weapon of choice to ensure that public schools, and the teachers working within them, would be forever on the defensive.

Later it became a strategy that conservative politicians were pleased to employ and to export.

However, there was one problem. *A Nation at Risk* had essentially got it wrong. Its fundamental premise that test scores had declined would eventually be challenged. However, the nature of the challenge and the reaction to it highlights the intensely political nature of the “education reform” agenda.

Notes

- 6 *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (April 1983) Washington DC, USA
- 7 Arthur Eugene Bestor, Jr. (1953) *Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Public Schools*
- 8 Gerald W. Bracey (2004) p4 *Setting the Record Straight: Responses to Misconceptions About Public Education in the U.S. (2nd Edition)*
- 9 Veronique de Rugy & Marie Gryphon (2004) *Elimination Lost: What happened to abolishing the Department of Education?* CATO Institute. In his 1982 State of the Union address, Reagan reiterated, “The budget plan I submit to you on February 8 will realize major savings by dismantling the Department of Education.”
- 10 Hyman G. Rickover (1959) *Education and Freedom*
- 11 Tamim Ansary *Education as Risk: Fallout From a Flawed Report* (www.edutopia.org/landmark-education-report-nation-risk)
- 12 Vinovskis, Maria (1999) *The Road to Charlottesville: The 1989 Education Summit* (A National Education Goals Panel NEGP Paper) p11

The Admiral and the Engineers

Sandia National Laboratories are two laboratories that undertake research and development for the US Department of Energy. They are owned by Lockheed Martin Corporation. But they were not always so. Sandia Laboratories grew out of the Manhattan Project of the Second World War established by the US government to develop the atomic bomb.

Perhaps because much of the content of *A Nation at Risk* was couched in terms that related to threats to national security it is not surprising that an institution that was part of the US military-industrial complex would take an interest in the report.

After a distinguished naval career, Admiral James D. Watkins was appointed in 1989 by President George H.W. Bush to the post of Secretary of Energy. He held this post until 1993.

One of his first acts, on behalf of the Department of Energy, was to commission the scientists of Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to find the hard data missing from the original report that would document and prove the decline in educational standards. It seemed a straightforward task and so the engineers at Sandia analysed the SAT data. One group took a particular interest in the data from the late 1970s until 1990.

When the Sandia scientists broke down the previously aggregated data into sub-groups based on poverty, ethnicity, ability, wealth, etc. a very different picture emerged. Almost every sub-group either improved or stayed constant. The data showed no decline at all. What was happening? Why had the overall average scores declined while each sub-group had either improved or remained steady?

The statisticians at Sandia knew the answer. It is called Simpson's paradox. While the average scores can head in one direction, the scores of each sub-group can move in the opposite direction. Once, only top-ranking students completed high school but as retention rates increased over time, more students were taking the SAT tests. Proportionally, therefore, the number of top-performing students was smaller, and so the average scores dropped. There was no decline after all as measured by the SAT tests, just many more students from much wider backgrounds sitting for the tests.

But rather than be greeted as the bearers of good news, the Sandia engineers were pressured not to release the 156-page 1990 *Sandia Report*. They had travelled to Washington and presented their report to both the Department of Education and the Department of Energy. The reception was not what they had expected. They were threatened by the then Deputy Secretary of Education, David Kearns, "You bury this, or I'll bury you". Admiral Watkins, now regretting his decision to commission the report, criticised the scientists in a letter to the *Albuquerque Journal*.¹³

Many of the scientists who had written the report feared for their careers. It was not until the first Bush administration had left office that the *Sandia Report* was eventually published in the Spring 1993 issue of the *Journal of Educational Research*. By then, any hope that the report could bring some balance into the debate on supposedly declining standards had evaporated.

In *Education as Risk: Fallout from a Flawed Report*¹⁴ the writer Tamim Ansary highlighted the original statistical evidence published in *A Nation at Risk* and the counter-evidence uncovered by the scientists at Sandia Laboratories. In stark contrast to the storm that was unleashed in the media when *A Nation at Risk* was published, the *Sandia Report* was largely ignored.



Sandia was pressured into burying its critical report

Notes

13 Bracey p10, op cit.

14 Tamim Ansary www.edutopia.org/landmark-education-report-nation-risk

The Fallout Spreads

UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Cultural and Scientific Organisation) has a membership of about 195 countries. Back in the 1980s there were about 150 member countries. It is an agency of the United Nations with a charter to promote cooperation between nations on a range of educational, cultural and scientific programs. Central to its aims are the elimination of poverty, the protection of human rights and greater cooperation and cultural exchange between nations. Unsurprisingly, the Reagan administration had an intense dislike of UNESCO. US conservatives loathe it to this day. It harks back to the Cold War era.

In the 1980s, UNESCO had been promised funding from the World Bank to develop a new range of educational indicators. Given UNESCO's work across the globe, particularly in developing countries, there was an expectation that these new indicators would be very broad and include a range of social and cultural measures that would give a context to educational achievement.



Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan — close allies

An early international test called the Secondary International Maths and Science Study had been cited in *A Nation at Risk*. The Reagan administration, now keenly aware of the power of test data and the extent to which it could be used for political purposes, intervened. Reagan was now adamant that any educational indicators be measured in ways that would support the central thesis of *A Nation at Risk*. And, of course, the central thesis of *A Nation at Risk* was that the hegemony of the US as an economic and military power was under threat and that public schools were to blame:

“We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighbourhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.”¹⁵

As Larry Kuehn has argued, “*A Nation at Risk* kicked off a new direction in international testing studies.”¹⁶ Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the British prime minister who was extraordinarily close to the US president, pressured UNESCO to adopt an international testing regime that would link education to economic purpose and emphasise accountability and performance rather than inputs and process. What motivated them was the political need to blame the education system for the economic malaise of both countries. *A Nation at Risk* had provided the original argument. UNESCO, however, governed by a council made up of member nations, refused.

The US went on to pull out of UNESCO in 1984 with the UK withdrawing the following year. Both nations also withdrew their funding of UNESCO, crippling many of its programs.

Both the US and the UK now turned to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) to undertake the development of the international tests. There was some initial reluctance but most countries capitulated following threats from the US and the UK that they would withdraw from that body as well.

“By the mid-80s, the US changed its role in the educational collaboration of the OECD from passivity to aggressive missionary activities... This policy was pursued with... attacks upon the education sector within the OECD Council...”¹⁷

The testing regime established by the OECD has since been criticised for having a relatively narrow focus that reflects the economic mandate of the OECD:

“[P]erformance indicators and finding numbers to define how the standards are met is (sic) pervasive. We see it in all areas of government, promoted by auditor-general offices and ideologically by those who want to limit government and make whatever remains of government look as much like the market system as possible.”¹⁸

The OECD applied market theory to public policy in general and to education in particular. The organisation first published its statistical report *Education at a Glance* in 1992 and relied on the processes and information technology the corporate world uses to keep international supply and demand-driven systems both manageable and profitable. It is an approach heavily reliant on notions of “inputs” and “outputs”. Around this time, notions of “outcomes-based education” theories underpinned changes to assessment and reporting.

Education authorities were charged with the responsibility to account for the “inputs”, the money spent on education, and to develop methods of educational auditing. Accountability became the new watchword everywhere and so school complexity and the work of teachers had to be measured and managed — just like in the “real world” of business.

This shift to OECD accountability mechanisms meant that the purpose and effect of data collection underwent a profound change. Educational data collection was to serve an economic imperative. After all, the central “mission” of the OECD is to ensure that governments establish “healthy public finances as a basis of sustainable economic growth” and “restore confidence in markets and the institutions and companies that make them function”.¹⁹

At the same time that strict centralised accountability controls were being established, both the US and the British governments were introducing policies of local “school autonomy”. But there is no contradiction here. The direct result of deregulating the public school system was the need to replace the regulations that governed the system with a central “command

and control” approach that could be strengthened through punitive accountability structures. Data collection, and the uses to which it is put, would be able to control the “freer” schools.

This was an era when the neo-conservatives and neo-liberals came into their own, joining forces and flourishing under Ronald Reagan’s presidency and, later, both the Bush administrations. The neo-cons were more inclined to be linked to the Christian Right while the neo-liberals believed in the unfettered power of the market. Their influence has been profound. While “education reform” can be regarded as the child born of the Reagan-era marriage of social conservatism and free-market extremism it should be remembered that the origins of the alliance date back to the 1950s when southern supporters of segregation united with free-market economists and political conservatives on the issue of school vouchers.²⁰

Arguably the most influential neo-liberal economist during the Reagan era was Milton Friedman. For many, “Reaganomics” and Friedman are synonymous. He had long been a critic of public schools. His best-selling book *Capitalism and Freedom* which contained his 1962 essay “The Role of Government in Education” was republished in 1982.

“[Friedman] believed that the establishment of the public education system in the United States was an example of “an island of socialism in a free market” society, and represented among “intellectuals a distrust of the market and of voluntary exchange”. The solution to this problem was clear — competition, choice, and a reliance on the free market to guide education policy.”²¹

Similar attitudes dominated the UK government as a result of the close political connections between the Reagan and Thatcher. It would only be a matter of time before these two powerful English-speaking nations would influence policy settings in countries such as Australia. And so the “global education reform movement” became a feature of educational policies around the world, particularly among the member nations of the OECD. A political consensus was achieved as well with ideas around “school autonomy”, “teacher performance” and “accountability” dominating the policies of mainstream political parties in many of these countries.

“Education is viewed primarily as an economic factor and one of the prime producers of human capital. The OECD has been a primary link in both the policy borrowing process and in promoting the new managerialism in education.”²²

The falling educational standards narrative was now dominating all discussions. The voices of teachers were rarely heard. And old elitists returned, spurred on by *A Nation at Risk* and the US leader’s fervent selling of it. Arthur Bestor’s 1953 book *Educational Wastelands* was republished with a new preface. Bestor was still resolute in his belief that “educational standards are still endangered as they were in 1953, and that deterioration remains unchecked”. Bestor’s second moment had arrived and he lost no time in endorsing *A Nation at Risk* in preparation for the second coming of his book.

In 1953, Bestor had written the following oft-quoted passage in *Educational Wastelands*. In the mid-1980s, he felt it still relevant and worthy of being republished:

“Across the educational world today stretches an iron curtain which the professional educationists are busily fashioning. Behind it, in slave labor camps, are classroom teachers, whose only hope of rescue is from without. On the hither side lies the free world of science and learning, menaced but not yet conquered.”

No wonder in this climate that rational debate about the real challenges facing public education was difficult to generate. The elitists and the philistines had formed an alliance. That alliance is just as strong today.



Powerful forces against public education in the Reagan years: from left, Milton Friedman, championed 'Reaganomics'; Arthur Bestor, author of *Educational Wastelands*, a 1953 manifesto on what he saw as declining educational standards. It was republished in 1985, when Reaganite 'reformists' used it for their agenda against public education

Notes

- 15 *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (April 1983) Washington DC, USA
- 16 Larry Kuehn, p62, 'Leaning Between Conspiracy and Hegemony' in Marita Moll (2004) *Passing the Test: The False Promises of Standardized Testing* Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
- 17 Kjell Eide, p48 30 Years Of Educational Collaboration In The O.E.C.D. (Paper to International Planning and Management of Educational Development Conference, Mexico, 26-30 March 1990)
- 18 Larry Kuehn op.cit. p61
- 19 www.oecd.org/about/
- 20 Fiala and Owens "Education Policy and Friedmanomics" p5
- 21 Fiala and Owens op. cit. p22
- 22 Larry Kuehn p 65 "The New Right Agenda in Education" published in *Education for Social Justice*

The Chain Reaction



President H.W. Bush at the National Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, 1989 ... not a teacher in sight

What has occurred in the US has been a chain of reactions still being experienced in schools today. Reagan had unleashed the fear campaign that was designed to blame public education for America's social and economic failings; the next administration, led by Reagan's former vice president, George H.W. Bush Sr, consolidated the conservative education agenda. In late September 1989, as the new president, Bush convened an "education summit" in Charlottesville at the University of Virginia. The use of the word "summit" was hardly accidental, reminiscent as it was of the summits called during the Cold War. It was language designed to reinforce the notion of a crisis.

A roll call of those invited to the education summit reveals that not one teacher, not one educator, not one academic was invited. Instead, Bush only invited politicians to the summit, state governors. Indeed, the summit was officially called *The President's Education Summit with Governors*. Unencumbered by the presence of educators, the summit went about establishing six national performance goals to be achieved by the year 2000.



From left: President G.W. Bush signs No Child Left Behind with bipartisan support; No Child Left Behind (NCLB) sets impossible goals; rewards for states following White House education policies - Arkansas gets a cheque for \$US9.8 million for NCLB test scores

The then governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, was in attendance at the Charlottesville summit. Some years later when he had become US president, his enthusiasm for national performance goals had not diminished. He took Bush's goals, "America 2000", added to them, and they became legislated as "Goals 2000: Educate America Act".

One of the first acts of the next president, George W. Bush, was to introduce the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) education policy, announcing it days after taking office in 2001. The essential drivers for education "reform" proposed under NCLB would be rewards and punishments, more politely referred to as incentives and sanctions. Essentially the NCLB Act heralded a new era of mass standardised testing across the US. While the NCLB Act was complex, more than 1000 pages long, its fundamental cruelty can be found in its central demand on schools. It established an impossible goal: that all states, by 2014, would ensure that 100 per cent of their student would achieve proficiency in mathematics and reading. Schools and schools districts would be required to report on adequate yearly progress (AYP) relative to the 2014 goal.

Regardless of disability, family breakdown, poverty, personal motivation, individual trauma, homelessness and the myriad of factors that influence a child's learning, all children in all schools were to achieve proficiency by 2014. What followed, of course, is obvious. The impossible target was not met. Schools were labelled as "needing improvement"; later they would be termed "failing schools". Across America teachers and principals were demonised, schools were closed, staff dismissed and the curriculum narrowed.

And all of this happened in a relatively short period of time.

By 2008, when President Barack Obama was elected, educators were hopeful that the NCLB Act would be overhauled with some sense of balance, if not sanity, returning to the debate. Instead, the bipartisanship in "education reform" continued with the new administration's *Race to the Top* policy. Many billions of federal dollars was set aside to bring in new "standards" and new tests. In order to be eligible, the states had to agree to "free" schools from "central controls" expand the number of charter schools and use test data to

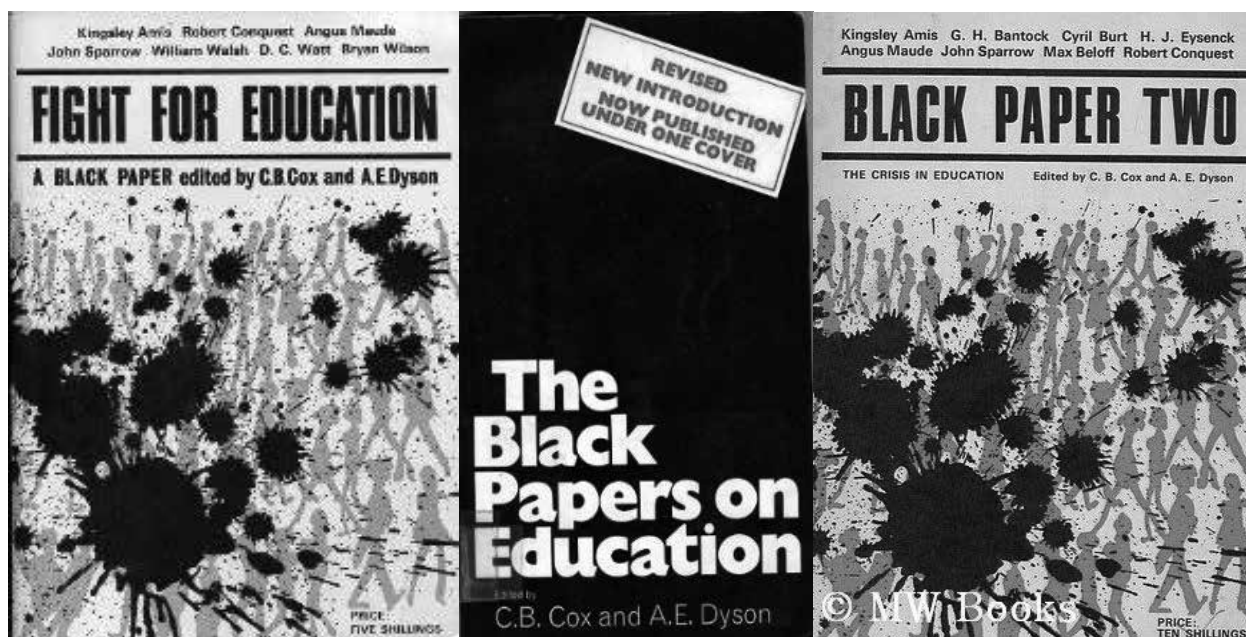


Race to the Top — linking testing to 'freeing' schools

evaluate teachers. The essential premise articulated in the fraudulent *A Nation At Risk* — that public education was in crisis because of a lack of accountability — underpins state and federal education policy to this day.

What has happened with public schooling across the US is simply extraordinary. Corporate America is financing and profiting from the dismantling of the country's last great public enterprise, schooling. Given the power and influence of the US internationally, educators would be wise to remain vigilant and attuned to the language of our politicians when they speak the language of "education reform". Pasi Sahlberg identifies the agenda as a global movement, to which we could add, a movement, like a virus, that barely recognises national borders.

Black Papers, Bleak Times



The conservative attack — the Black Papers

“In our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards, and more and more are abandoning the study of those subjects by which the essentials of our culture... are transmitted; destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will encamp in their mechanised caravans.” — T.S. Eliot

In 1992, Australia was four years into the first serious attack on public education that could be directly linked to conservative political forces in the US and the UK. In 1988, the Liberal Party led by Nick Greiner had been elected to govern the state of NSW, and its Minister of Education, Terry Metherell, immediately employed a management consultancy firm to write his education policy. The firm got “money for jam” authoring a *Schools Renewal* policy that was largely plagiarised from the policies of the British Conservative Party, led at the time by Margaret Thatcher.

And it was in 1992, with the NSW public education community reeling from the extremism of the changes brought about by *Schools Renewal*, that the former New South Wales Teachers Federation president Denis Fitzgerald, then a classroom teacher, published a report entitled, *Our Way*. Having returned from a study tour overseas he was struck by the common themes and strategies employed by the Right in the attacks on public education:

“[M]y union sent me overseas to look at the impact of foreign and distant educational trends and to ascertain the implications of these for NSW public education. I came back ... with diminished respect for the ‘Mother Countries’ (Britain and the US) and perturbed by the degree to which we still copy the worst and most alien features of the Old World.”²³

As was seen with the publication in the US of *A Nation at Risk*, the common strategy of governments is to precede any educational change with an analysis that confirms a crisis. This is one of the ongoing attractions of mass testing as it provides politicians with an endless supply of arguments that support the proposition that standards are in decline. Writers, think-tanks, journalists and commentators are enlisted to convince the public that the crisis exists.

There is a tradition in Westminster-style governments to develop “green” and “white” papers, green being the initial discussion document, white being the final version that indicates the policy direction the government intends to take.

But a “black” paper? It was an in-joke. Except that it wasn’t particularly funny as it turned out.

The *Black Papers* on education, written by a group of individuals in the late 1960s and 1970s in the UK, were meant to be the antithesis of a government white paper. But perhaps more than any official white paper, these documents have influenced educational policy, both in England and Australia, ever since.

As can be seen by the remarks of T.S. Eliot in his extended 1948 essay, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, much of the debate in Britain has centred on the decline of educational standards caused by mass education. Standards were much higher when only the elite were educated. The authors of the *Black Papers* would have agreed.

Even before the *Black Papers* were written, however, those who were repulsed by the idea of educating the masses in the UK had made their concerns well known. In October 1954, Sir David Eccles, the newly-appointed education secretary, let it be known where the Tories stood:

“[Concerning secondary education] ... one has to choose between justice and equality, for it is impossible to apply both principles at once. Those who support comprehensive schools prefer equality. Her Majesty’s present government prefers justice. My colleagues and I will never allow local authorities to assassinate the grammar schools.”²⁴

One of the UK Government white papers that triggered the extraordinary Black Papers was the 1958 white paper, “Secondary Education for All: A New Drive”. In response to the post-war baby boom and the need for Britain to rebuild after the war, there were calls to increase the participation and retention rates in secondary education. It was designed to meet the growing demands of a modern economy while providing equality of opportunity for all British youth.

The other significant development was the release of the Plowden Report in 1967 which trumpeted child-centred learning, with a particular emphasis on the disadvantaged.

Labour Secretary of State for Education (1968–70) Edward Short commented, “In my view, the publication of the *Black Paper* was one of the blackest days for education in the past century.” Forty years later, he reiterated this: “These were scurrilous documents; quite disgraceful.”²⁵ But what was considered extreme in one decade became formal government policy in the next. The influence of the *Black Papers* on both major parties in the UK must not be underestimated.



British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher ... her policies were to convert the school system 'from a public service to a market'

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister. A fierce and uncompromising ideologue, she set about changing Britain forever. Her policies were founded on a belief in the right-wing ideology of an unfettered market, the privatisation of state enterprises, the deregulation of financial institutions and opposition to labour rights and organised trade unionism. It was inevitable that it was only a matter of time before she turned her sights on the British education system.

“... [T]he twin aims of Margaret Thatcher's education policies in the 1980s were to convert the nation's schools system from a public service into a market, and to transfer power from local authorities to central government.”²⁶

Thatcher's first education secretary, Mark Carlisle, was replaced in late 1981 by Keith Joseph, a former barrister, who was on the extreme right wing of the British Conservatives. He was driven by a belief in monetarist policies and in 1974, along with Margaret Thatcher, had established a right-wing think-tank called the Centre for Policy Studies which advocated for schools to be autonomous. It was an institute heavily influenced by the economic theories of Milton Friedman. In a speech in 1976 that has become well known, the Stockton Lecture *Monetarism is Not Enough*, he argued that the economy was divided between the “wealth producers” and the “wealth consumers”.²⁷ State education was clearly a “wealth consumer”. In many respects it was Keith Joseph who was the first to articulate what has become known as “Thatcherism”.

In 1986, Thatcher appointed Kenneth Baker as Education Secretary. She commanded him to change the system and gave him a month to devise the policies and the strategies.

Baker set about the task of changing the school system with some enthusiasm unburdened by any knowledge but very aware of how the politics should be played. The void created by an absence of any serious theoretical basis for the changes was filled by political ideology, motivated by hostility towards teachers and an enduring hatred of comprehensive schooling. During this period, Baker introduced dramatic and permanent changes, all highly political and experimental: standardised testing, league tables, standardised assessment, parental “choice” and the “local management” of schools and a much strengthened ministry. As his interviewer commented some years later,

“On the face of it, a reform of schools would have to have, as its overriding priority, the welfare of children. Since this involved the construction of a new system to disseminate learning and knowledge, it would have to be built on a particularly strong intellectual foundation, a great deal of solid research and clear thinking. Not so. The most sweeping educational reforms this century, it transpires, had just as much to do with guesswork, personal whim and bare-knuckle politics.”²⁸

His first real task was to stymie any opposition from teacher unions before he could pursue the real goal of the Tories, the destruction of comprehensive schooling by robbing Local Educational Authorities (LEA) of their influence and replacing them with a devolved school autonomy model. The system was to be broken up. In reflecting on this period, Baker himself recalled, “It was absolutely extreme stuff”.²⁹



Former UK education secretary Kenneth Baker, now Lord Baker of Dorking, receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Warwick

Thatcher’s government legislated “local school management” motivated by a belief that public provision was always wasteful and ineffective. A bonus would be to weaken the teacher unions and to disempower the teaching profession. The key to the success was to seduce the public, and sections of the profession, by appropriating the language of progressive education: “local control”, “community involvement”, “parental choice”, “freedom and flexibility”, “innovation” and so on. But there was nothing progressive or benign about the agenda. Education was to be turned into a marketplace, each school was to thrive or survive in a new competitive environment. Baker later acknowledged the brutality of the government’s approach, “Oh, certainly there was a political edge to the attack on the LEAs. Oh, yes, though no one ever admitted it.”³⁰

While the rhetoric was “local management”, the reality was that by 1988, with the introduction of the Education Reform Act, all power and influence over what happened in schools was wrested from Local Educational Authorities and retained by Downing Street. Much of the dogma of the *Black Papers* was now reflected in legislation:

“Conservative legislation sought to drive neo-liberal principles into the heart of public policy. An emphasis on cost reduction, privatisation and deregulation was accompanied by vigorous measures against the institutional bases of Conservatism’s opponents, and the promotion of new forms of public management. The outcome of these processes was a form of governance in which market principles were advanced at the same time as central authority was strengthened.”³¹

The real aim of “local management” was to devolve budgets to the school level. Thatcher was a monetarist who wanted to dramatically and permanently reduce expenditure in all areas of government. Passing control of school budgets to the school level would prove to be the mechanism, the masterstroke. Who could dare criticise the concept that local managers know best how to manage? Yet behind the glib rhetoric was a cruel deceit intended to shift the focus of the profession from criticising government cutbacks to managing government cuts to school funding.

“The freedom which LMS [Local Management of Schools] was supposed to offer schools was, in practice, largely illusory... For the government, LMS served three purposes: it was an important element in the creation of an education market; it took financial control away from the local authorities; and it enabled the government to ‘pass the buck’ to the schools when budgets were cut — as they were from the second year of LMS onwards. Indeed, school budgets were cut in six of the eight years following 1988.”³²

For conservative politicians elsewhere, including Australia, this was too good to be true. Within a short period of time, they unashamedly plagiarised the policies; firstly, in NSW with the Greiner government’s introduction of *School Renewal*, and later in Victoria by former Premier Jeff Kennett and his government’s *Schools of the Future* agenda. It would be hard to find a home-grown educational policy from that era. This fragmenting and weakening of the public school system in Australia began as the direct lift from Thatcher’s England.

The two defining features of Thatcherism, when applied to education, are a withdrawal of funding and structural changes that entrench inequity. In this education marketplace, the advantaged retain and extend their privilege, and the schools in areas of disadvantage become further residualised.

Although Thatcher was deposed by John Major in November 1990, Thatcherism continued. A new control mechanism was established, its name evocative of Orwell’s *1984*. It was the Office for Standards in Education, or Ofsted. This body became the instrument that would publicly denigrate schools as “failing”.

Any hope that that Labour, upon returning to power in May 1997, might reverse the damage was short-lived. New Labour’s education policies were driven by the same old ideology of “choice and diversity”. Selective and specialist schools continued to be established to undermine comprehensive education. Blair reflected the same antipathy towards comprehensive schools as had the Conservatives. Labour began to complete the privatisation agenda established by Thatcher. Tony Blair’s belief in market forces was as strident as Thatcher’s — so much so that the joke at the time was that Blair should have been regarded as Thatcher’s greatest achievement.

But the problem with seeing schooling as a marketplace and parents as consumers is that not all customers are equal. Some customers are wealthy and influential, others are poor and disenfranchised. Is the market, therefore, capable of treating all children equally? Competitive markets only operate successfully when there are winners and losers. In an educational marketplace, who are the losers? But of course, the reality is that it is not parents who choose schools, rather that schools choose parents.



Prime Minister Tony Blair — Thatcher's greatest achievement?

Under Blair the Tory agenda continued. Schools were named, shamed and closed. More academically selective schools were announced. Privatisation was encouraged. Business became more involved and previous local authority roles were handed to private companies. “Public/private” partnerships were created. An expanded role for churches and charities in education provision was encouraged. Under Blair, England’s education system became even more of a marketplace with the opening of a plethora of competing religious schools, private schools, grammar schools, specialist schools, beacon schools, church schools, foundation schools, academies and so on.

So extreme has been agenda that has unfolded over the last three decades that the current British government has taken the next “logical” step: the full privatisation of schooling by encouraging companies to run schools on a profit basis.

Notes

- 23 Denis Fitzgerald (1992) p6, *Our Way: Reflections of an Australian teacher returning from the Mother Countries*
- 24 Sir David Eccles quoted in *The Schoolmaster* 7 January 1955
- 25 BBC Radio 4 series *Comp* broadcast September 2005
- 26 Gillard, Derek (2011) *Education in England: a brief history* www.educationengland.org.uk/history
- 27 Joseph, Keith (1976) *Monetarism Is Not Enough* www.margaretthatcher.org/document/110796
- 28 Nick Davies (1999) *Schools in crisis, part 3: How Tory political coup bred educational disaster* The Guardian 17 September 1999
- 29 Davies op cit
- 30 Kenneth Baker quoted in Davies op cit
- 31 Jones, 2003 p 107 quoted in Gillard, Derek
- 32 Gillard op cit

Forward to the Past

The Parochial Schools Bill was debated in the House of Commons on June 13, 1807. MPs who rose in opposition claimed that “to impose compulsory education on the country [would be] at a most incalculable expense” (John Simeon, later Baronet Simeon), and noted Tory MP and Oxford-educated Davies Giddy argued the Bill,

“... was more pregnant with mischief than advantage to those whose advantage it was intended, and for the country in general. For, however specious in theory the project might be, of giving education to the labouring classes of the poor, it would, in effect, be found to be prejudicial to their morals and happiness; it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture, and other laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them; instead of teaching them subordination, it would render them factious and refractory [and] would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books, and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolent to their superiors ...”.³³

Those speeches came from a time when nations, coping with the new industrial age, were at the embryonic stage of developing ideas for a compulsory, free and secular education system, as opposed to the private academies and personal tutors for wealthy families that characterised pre-industrial times. While we might find some amusement in these speeches now, there are powerful interests that encourage modern-day politicians to argue that the free, secular and comprehensive education systems established throughout the twentieth century are no longer viable and pose a cost burden to the taxpayer. The results of the painstaking work of educators over the last century — particularly in the post-war period — to build a universal system open to all, are now at risk.

Public schools, and the students and teachers within them, have now been the subject of radical experimentation that began just over three decades ago and that has as its central purpose the dismantling of comprehensive education.

The notion of a local comprehensive high school — comprehensive in what it taught and who it enrolled — serving a geographically defined community has always been politically loaded. The thinking behind the establishment of the locally-defined, centrally funded comprehensive school system was that one could be built in any community — wealthy or poor — and students would have access to the same curriculum, the same qualified teachers, the same resources.

The US had established a public comprehensive secondary education system from about the end of the First World War. Perhaps there were a variety of reasons for this. America had come out of the 1914-1918 war as the world's dominant economy. “America was the

first country to identify adolescence, and a new type of schooling to cater for this age cohort, largely because at least some regions were sufficiently prosperous and technologically advanced to dispense with the labour of teenagers. America's wealth and democratic spirit created public comprehensive high schools charging no fees and open to all." ³⁴

By contrast, in the UK, it was not until the end of the Second World War that the call for "secondary education for all" became British Labour Party policy and, finally, a political imperative that would possibly mitigate against the worst aspects of the British class system and serve the interests of a nation rebuilding in the post-war period. Comprehensive education was seen as egalitarian and championed by progressive educators, and by the mid-1960s it was well-established.

Comprehensive schooling embodied, for Americans, the ideal of the democratic spirit; for the British it represented egalitarianism. Australia followed the UK in implementing state-based comprehensive school systems. Public *secondary* education up until the 1960s in Australia was characterised by low retention rates and the streaming of children into vocational or academic schools. While there was some idealism that comprehensive education could overcome class disadvantage, the reality is that schools did and do reflect the social conditions in which they are situated. This analysis led to the many equity programs based on need that were created in the 1970s.

But, even without equity programs, many political conservatives opposed the very principle of equality of opportunity that underpinned the public comprehensive system. The economic conditions of the 1970s that followed the "oil shock" led to high unemployment levels and high inflation and gave the Right the very excuse it needed. Rather than blame the economic system for the crisis, schools became the scapegoat. Finally, it could be proclaimed that the comprehensive system had failed. After less than two decades of comprehensive schooling, policies calling for the reintroduction of selectivity and specialisation were championed once again.

There appears to be a common *modus operandi* adopted by "education reformers" in whatever jurisdiction they operate. At first, there is the requirement to establish as a truth that there is an educational "crisis". Mass testing provides an endless source of data for this purpose. The crisis becomes a permanent state of affairs. The curriculum is contested. The next stage is to convince the community that there is a need for radical solutions. At this stage, teachers are generally characterised as the problem. This is designed to preempt and neutralise any opposition from the profession. Equally as important is to argue against the provision of additional funding as "throwing money is not the answer". Finally, simplistic dichotomies are established: bloated education bureaucracies have stifled innovation as opposed to the freedoms enjoyed by efficient self-managing schools; teacher unions protect the weak through collective agreements as opposed to the incentive of merit pay for the gifted individual; schools are controlled by distant bureaucrats as opposed to local parents; schools will always underperform unless exposed to competition and choice; increased funding is unsustainable so schools need to operate more like businesses; traditional schools no longer engage students as opposed to the new technologies that do; the testing of students provides accountability and that is why teachers are opposed to mass testing. The list of distractions is endless.

But the overriding solution offered always is structural. And these structural changes almost inevitably lead to the withdrawal of systemic support for schools, to governments retreating

from any obligation to build, maintain, fund and staff schools. This so-called structural solution originally came in many guises — “site-based decision-making”, “school-based management”, “site-based autonomy”, “local autonomy”, “local authority”, “local decision-making”, “devolved responsibility”, “local management of schools”, “empowering local schools” and so on — but essentially all the models were cast from the same one-size-fits-all mould. To this day, the common features include increased centralised accountability requirements from which the profession is alienated and powerless to shape, and an increased burden of responsibilities at the local level. Steven Ball aptly described the reality as the “self-management of decline”.³⁵

These ideas are hardly new. If we could return to the Parochial Schools debate for a moment, we would see that nineteenth-century education was largely made up of stand-alone schools, locally managed, owned and operated.

Australian educators have an opportunity to observe what is happening in both the US and the UK and, while being careful not to conflate the agendas, take warning. In the US, the structural changes to public education are gathering pace, led by an “education reform” movement largely external to the teaching profession.

“The ‘reform’ movement is really a ‘corporate reform’ movement, funded to a large degree by major foundations, Wall Street hedge fund managers, entrepreneurs, and the US Department of Education. The movement is determined to cut costs and to maximise competition among schools and among teachers. It seeks to eliminate the geographically based system of public education as we have known it for the past 150 years and replace it with a competitive market-based system of school choice — one that includes traditional public schools, privately managed charter schools, religious schools, voucher schools, for-profit schools, virtual schools, and for-profit vendors of instruction.”³⁶

It is the charter school experiment that has become central to the reform agenda in the US. In the UK the move is to establish “free” schools and “academies”.

The US charter schools are established under state law and are publicly funded and supposedly granted greater autonomy over management. The charter is effectively a performance contract with a fixed term. Some are established as stand-alone schools as “start-ups” and others as replacements for existing public schools. The schools are operated by a plethora of organisations and well-connected foundations. Many now are operated as part of huge for-profit chains. There would appear to be little financial accountability even though these schools are receiving public funding as well as money from corporations, non-profit and philanthropic organisations. In some areas of the States the number of charter schools is capped, and if enrolment applications exceed available places a lottery system is used.

Because charter schools are largely unregulated, there is a huge disparity in how they operate, how they are managed, enrolment policies, funding sources and student results. Today, more than 90 per cent of charter schools are not unionised and have high levels of staff turnover.³⁷

The idea of charter schools was born in the 1970s in the US. It was first proposed by Ray Budde when he was teaching educational administration at the University of Massachusetts. In the wake of the release of *A Nation at Risk* and the subsequent national debate, the idea was floated again in 1988 by Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers. The essence of his idea was that teachers in a school would develop a charter

with the local district whereby they would undertake to adopt innovative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy for those students who had disengaged and who were at risk of dropping out. In return, the local district education office agreed not to interfere in the “charter school” so long as student results improved.



Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers

But today, the original conceptual thinking behind the charter school experiment is largely irrelevant. Albert Shanker would eventually become disillusioned with the charter schools movement. His ideal was that teachers could only be innovative if they had the job security and conditions that unionism provided. He also wanted charter schools evaluated, but not by using standardised test scores which, he warned, would only narrow the curriculum.

“... Shanker withdrew his endorsement of charter schools in 1993 and became a vociferous critic. As he watched the charter movement evolve, as he saw new businesses jump into the ‘education industry’, he realised that the idea was being taken over by corporations, entrepreneurs, and practitioners of ‘do your own thing’... He came to see charter schools as dangerous to public education, as the cutting edge of an effort to privatise the public schools.”³⁸

The reality is that there were well-connected conservatives who were stalking public education. They saw the public school system as an example of a government monopoly that had to be broken up. The charter school concept was a godsend — allowing them to fragment and balkanise the system and avoid having to use words such as “privatisation”.

“[Charter schools] have become the leading edge of a long-cherished ideological crusade by the far right to turn education into a consumer choice rather than a civic obligation.”³⁹

A civic obligation — once, this would have been regarded as a conservative, traditional value; in the current era it is considered radical and contestable. What was once regarded as an idea on the periphery of educational policy now dominates education policy debates.

There are now almost 6000 charter schools in the US, about 5 per cent of all schools, which enrol almost two million students. Since 2008, more than 4000 traditional public schools have closed: this represents a huge shift in resources to privately-managed charter schools. More than 40 states have passed legislation authorising the establishment of charter schools.⁴⁰ The schools can be privately run but attract public funding. After 20 years of operation, the issue of charter schools dominates education debate across the US. What might have started as a progressive idea is now promoted by an alliance of powerful corporations and conservative politicians. What had started as an idea for innovation within the public schools system is now largely used by neo-liberal “education reformers” to promote “competition and choice” in opposition to traditional public schools.

Of course, one of the first claims of the charter school movement was the promise that they could deliver higher test scores. Over time, there was huge discrepancy in what was promised and what was achieved. There have been a number of studies that have confirmed that success in charter schools was largely illusory.

“A study of 16 states, covering 70 per cent of all charter schools, found that only 17 per cent of charters produced academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools serving demographically similar students, while 37 per cent performed worse than their traditional public school counterparts, and 46 per cent showed no difference from district-run public schools.”⁴¹

One of the more recent developments has been the Obama Administration's requirement that, in order to be eligible for *Race to the Top* funding, states must encourage the opening of charter schools. But what is profoundly disturbing has been the growth in the private corporate sector's involvement in the charter schools movement. There has been a proliferation of “for-profit” charter schools established by national charter school franchises. In effect, *Race to the Top* has continued the damage that *No Child Left Behind* started, making billions of federal dollars available for states to implement schemes for which barely any research evidence exists, such as implementing vouchers, hiring unqualified college graduates as teachers, increasing testing, linking teacher pay to test scores, closing traditional schools and encouraging private corporations to manage schools. Perhaps the ultimate irony is that there is very little “choice” involved. What is driving the US education “reform” agenda is a combination of perverse incentives, coercion, political deals and corporate lobbying. As the *Washington Post's* Watergate journalist was told by his source, Deep Throat, “Follow the money. Always follow the money.”⁴²

Notes

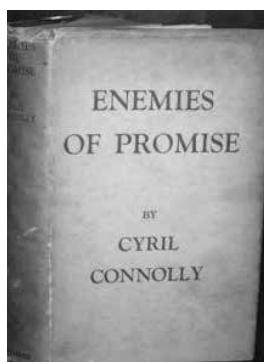
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- 34 p137 “Comprehensive Secondary Schools in Australia: a View from Newcastle, New South Wales” in *Education Research and Perspectives*, Vol 34, No 1, 2007
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- 36 Ravitch (2013) pp 19-20
- 37 David A. Stuit and Thomas M. Smith (2012) Explaining the gap in charter and traditional public school teacher turnover rates in *Economics of Education Review* 31 pp 268-279
- 38 Ravitch (2010) pp123-124
- 39 Diane Ravitch *The Charter School Mistake* Los Angeles Times, 1 October 2013
- 40 Stan Karp www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/28_01/28_01_karp.shtml
- 41 Linda Darling-Hammond p268 *The Flat World and Education*
- 42 Quoted in Barbara Miner *The Ultimate Superpower: Supersized dollars drive Waiting for Superman agenda* www.NOTwaitingforsuperman.org October 2010

Come on in

In the UK, the Blair Labour government established “academies” within the state education system in 2000 that were confirmed in legislation with the passing of amendments to the Education Act in 2002. They are essentially the English equivalent of the American charter school. Bypassing the Local Education Authority, the academies were to replace “failing” schools and were required to be sponsored by businesses. There was bipartisan support for the introduction of academies. At the time of the May 2010 election which saw Labour defeated and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition led by David Cameron come to power, there were 203 academies.

The Cameron government passed the Academies Act in July 2010, removing the need for academies to be sponsored and allowing the government to enter into academy arrangements with any person. By mid-2013, the number of academies has grown to over 3000. However, despite claims of academies being autonomous schools controlled by local communities, the real control rests with the sponsor. Democratically-elected council authority over local schools has been removed.

“All over England, schools are being obliged to become academies: supposedly autonomous bodies which are often sponsored (the government’s euphemism for controlled) by foundations established by exceedingly rich people. The break-up of the education system in this country, like the dismantling of the NHS [National Health Service], reflects no widespread public demand. It is imposed, through threats, bribes and fake consultations, from on high.”⁴³



Gove's inspiration

In the Cameron government's 2010 white paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, the intention is clearly articulated: “It is our ambition that Academy status should be the norm for all state schools”.⁴⁴ By February 2013, leaked minutes of a high-level meeting within the Department for Education exposed that the real plan of the then UK Education Secretary, Michael Gove, was to hand all academies and free schools to the private sector to be run on a profit basis.⁴⁵

Gove attacked critics of his policy as “Marxist teachers hell-bent on destroying our schools”.⁴⁶ He declared, “The fight against the Enemies of Promise is a fight for our children’s future”. The phrase “enemies of promise” is the title of Cyril Connolly’s 1938 autobiographical work which, in part, dealt with his harrowing time as a bullied boarder at Eton. It was an odd comment in other ways. Gove, an education secretary responsible for the education of children, was invoking an author whose most famous and oft-quoted sentence from his book is, “There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall”.



Former UK Education Secretary Michael Gove

At the extreme end of the “school autonomy” spectrum are the “free schools” now being established in the UK under the Academies Act. The concept was borrowed from the controversial experiment that Sweden has conducted since the mid-1990s, when the Swedish government allowed private for-profit “free schools” — *friskolor* — to be established and receive full public funding. Due to a lack of oversight and an absence of any serious regulation, many “free schools” in Sweden have elected not to have a library, student counselling services or school nurses despite receiving government funding to provide them. Some education researchers in Sweden have argued that “free schools” have also been inflating their school tests scores.⁴⁷

In June 2013, one of Sweden’s largest private school companies, JB Education, a for-profit company that owned a chain of schools, announced it was closing. JB Education had approximately 10,000 students enrolled. Nineteen of its high schools were to be sold and the remaining four closed. JB Education had already closed four schools earlier in the year. The school chain had been bought by a Danish private equity group called Axcel.

Private equity firms are dominant players in Swedish “free schools” and are looking to the UK to invest in the opening schools market there. Two of the largest Swedish companies, Internationella Engelska Skolan (IES) and Kunskapsskolan, are owned by private equity firms. Both these companies are now managing schools in the UK on a non-profit basis until the UK introduces legislative changes to allow for-profit status.

There is now a something akin to a religious fervour that characterises the current British government’s language around “free schools”, as reflected in this extraordinary statement by David Cameron in a UK government media release on July 13, 2012:

“Free schools symbolise everything that is good about the revolution that we are bringing to Britain’s schools. Choice for parents, power in the hands of teachers, discipline and rigour and high quality education in areas that are crying out for more good local schools. The message from the first two years is clear and unambiguous. Free schools work and parents and teachers want more of them.

The free schools revolution was built on a simple idea. Open up our schools to new providers and use the competition that results to drive up standards across the system. We are backing the parents, charities and committed teachers who are trying to make things better and giving them the freedoms they need to transform our education system.”

A revolution? After two years and without a research basis, the British government is undertaking the most radical structural change to education from which there might well be no return. But what is also revealed in this statement is the extreme ideological underpinning of the policy. Cameron's use of the term “charities” shows the direct link to a notion that “big government” will be replaced by Big Society. In reality, much of the language reflects a theory promulgated by theologian Phillip Blond of the right-wing think-tank, ResPublica, and author of *Red Tory: How Left and Right Have Broken Britain and How We Can Fix It*. It builds on ideas articulated in Tony Blair's so-called Third Way, which saw the introduction of academies and school “league tables” among other changes.

The essential idea behind Big Society is that government, or the state, needs to retreat from providing public services of any kind. The gap in services, is to be filled by private enterprise, charities, churches and non-government organisations with a heavy reliance on “volunteerism” and “mutualism”. Government funding will shrink, or be diverted to private organisations and corporations, with additional funding from private investment and philanthropy. This is seen as more efficient and liberating. Citizens will become “free” of government. Public servants will be replaced by community members and volunteers. The adherents to this ideology see the government school system as a monopoly that needs to be broken up.

Just as with the “school autonomy” rhetoric that hammers concepts such as local control and empowerment, Big Society advocates also choose their words carefully.

But cut through the white noise of the speeches and the reality exposed is that, not long after being elected to office, the Cameron government reduced public expenditure by a massive £81 billion and set about reducing the number of public sector workers by 710,000 over a six-year period.

In this context, Cameron's advocacy for school autonomy is chilling: “We should be trusting local parents and we should be breaking open the state monopoly and saying, if you want to set up a great new school, if you want to provide great state education, come on in”.⁴⁸

Notes

43 George Monbiot, *The Guardian* 5 March 2013, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/04/education-capitalist-command-economy

44 p52 UK Department for Education (2010) *The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper*

45 ‘Secret memo shows Michael Gove's plan for privatisation of academies’ *The Independent* 10 February 2013

46 (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2298146/I-refuse-surrender-Marxist-teachers-hell-bent-destroying-schools-Education-Secretary-berates-new-enemies-promise-opposing-plans.html>)

47 *The Guardian* 11 September 2011 www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/10/sweden-free-schools-experiment

48 David Cameron 2 September 2011 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/8734830/Free-schools-Bradfords-Kings-Academy-leads-the-way.html>

Words, words, words

“Do not use their language. Their language picks out a frame — and it won't be the frame you want... Framing is about getting language that fits your world-view. It is not just language. The ideas are primary — and the language carries those ideas, evokes those ideas.”

In his well-known book, *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2004), cognitive linguist George Lakoff warns of the power of language to frame debates. In *Moral Politics* (1996 and 2002) he argues that the Right has been much more successful than the progressive side of politics in using central and powerful metaphors to dominate political discourse. For instance, he argues that the use of the words “tax relief” by George W. Bush upon gaining office framed taxation as a burden or an affliction from which people needed a relief. Lakoff goes further and argues that the Right has successfully employed think-tanks for decades to create effective metaphors and contrive language to frame debates.

When applied to the language that surrounds the education “reform” agenda, Lakoff's theories have a particular resonance. There is a seemingly endless list of expressions used to frame debates, disguise the real agenda and effectively shut out opposition — principal authority or autonomy, empowering local schools, school autonomy, independent public schools, parent choice, Local Schools, Local Decisions, self-managing schools, free schools, academies, parent control, local decision making, schools renewal, merit pay, teacher quality, and on and on.

Of course, ideas are never neutral. They are generated and promulgated for a purpose. While the ideas may become noticed, the purpose is often disguised. There have always been circles of like-minded people through the ages, but it was the post-war period that saw the proliferation of think-tanks. Many of these seemingly neutral research bodies are funded by corporations to ensure their interests are advanced.

The notion of a “tank” is that it is closed and protected, allowing the insiders to generate ideas free from external or critical voices. They tend to have small staffing levels but have strong links to politicians and key media players. While there are think-tanks that exist on the Left, the number of right-wing think-tanks, funded by corporations and billionaires, appears to be growing exponentially.

To really explore the growth of right-wing think-tanks and their influence on educational policies around the world, particularly the US, would require a book — a very large book — and one that would need constant updating.

The US situation is informative, particularly given the international connections these think-tanks have across the world, including Australia.



US evangelicals formed part of Ronald Reagan's rightwing network that influenced educational policies — here Reagan for the first time gives his infamous 'evil empire' speech at an evangelicals' conference in 1983

The so-called think-tanks are in reality fronts for corporations. They have formed into a well-organised network to endorse and fund political candidates. It is worth having a brief look at this network, which is known as the State Policy Network.

The origins of this right-wing network started in 1973 with the establishment, by Paul Weyrich and Edwin Feulner, of the Heritage Foundation funded by beer baron, Joseph Coors. In 1979, Weyrich also established the conservative Christian political lobby group, Moral Majority, along with the televangelist, Jerry Falwell. In 1981 it published *Mandate for Leadership* which was highly influential during the Reagan administration. It is estimated that, of the 2000 policy proposals advocated in the publication, more than 60 per cent were initiated during Reagan's term of office.⁴⁹

Given the success of the Heritage Foundation, Reagan called for the founding of a network based on the Heritage Foundation model in every state across America. The billionaire timber and building supplies businessman, Thomas Roe, took up the initiative and founded the South Carolina Policy Council. Soon after, similar groups were formed in other states. In 1992, Roe and a number of other wealthy right-wing businessmen bankrolled the coalescing of these groups into the State Policy Network (SPN).

The SPN was not overly influential in its early years but by 1998 it had transformed into an extraordinarily powerful body. By 2013, it had 63 state-based organisations affiliated with a combined revenue of more than US\$80 million. To understand its influence, it is important to understand that it has become an important tool for some of the world's richest CEOs to have carried into law an extreme right-wing program.⁵⁰

The SPN has pushed a very broad agenda including weakening environmental protection, attacking trade union rights, protecting tobacco and fossil fuel companies, pushing for tax breaks for the rich and privatising education.

The SPN is a member and sponsor of the controversial and highly influential American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), founded in 1973. Some of America's largest corporations are also members of ALEC. Together, SPN and ALEC have developed a range of policies designed to weaken the traditional public school system. They include support for vouchers, tax-breaks for companies starting charter schools, bonus pay in place of collective agreements for teachers and testing agendas designed to name, shame and close public schools.



The American Legislative Exchange Council's 'report cards'

While many of the member organisations of the SPN describe themselves as think-tanks, ALEC is more of a “do tank”. ALEC membership is made up of state legislators and corporations. The main purpose of ALEC is to create model legislation which can then be introduced and carried in state legislatures across the USA. In essence, the legislators create a model bill on a policy position that its sponsors support and adjusts it to local circumstances. An example of how this works is the privatisation of prisons. Two of America's largest for-profit prison companies are Corrections Corporation of America and the GEO Group. Both are members of ALEC. ALEC has actively created model state legislation to allow for more privately run for-profit prisons. As well, ALEC has created model “tough on crime” legislation that has caused a massive explosion in the US prison population.

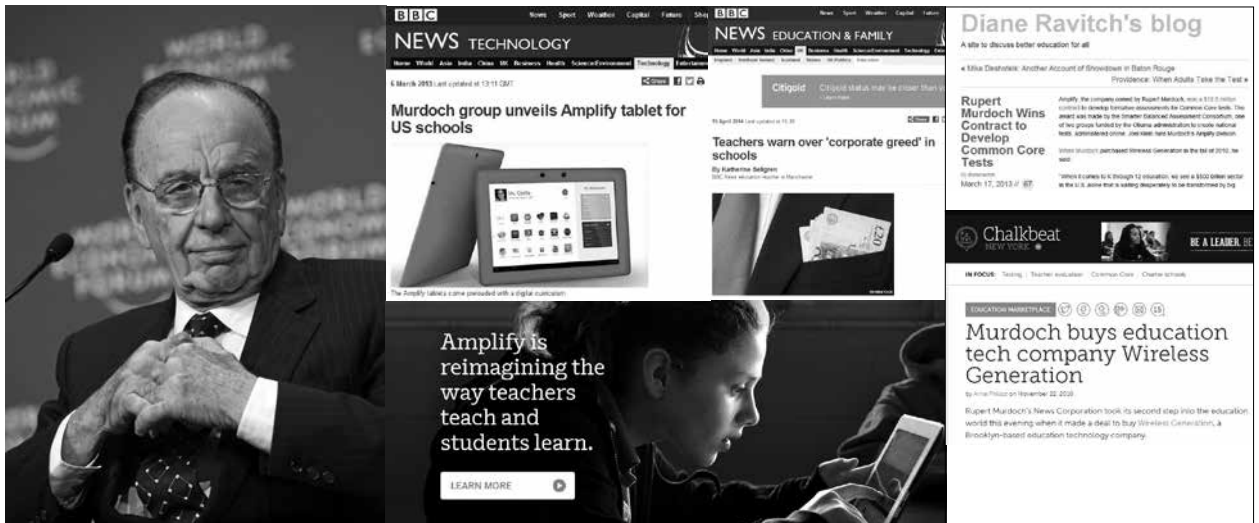
As well as having more than 300 corporate members, ALEC's membership includes more than 2000 state legislators — more than a quarter of all legislators. Approximately 1000 ALEC-created bills are introduced into state legislatures every year, with about 200 of these carried.⁵¹

From 1985, less than two years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, ALEC began to intervene significantly in education policy development. The legislative program included vouchers (now called scholarships) for parents to use in private schools, and tax concessions for private schooling as well as support for the creation of charter schools.

By 2007, ALEC's strategic push against public schools intensified with the publication of *School Choice and State Constitutions*, a joint ALEC-Institute for Justice report that identified and listed the model legislation in each state conducive to creating school choice programs.⁵²

In ALEC's *Report Card on American Education* (2012) more than twenty examples of model legislation are listed including the following:

- *Alternative Certification Act* — that would weaken teaching qualifications
- *Teacher Quality and Recognition Demonstration Act* — exempts education agencies from rules and regulations relating to teacher certification, tenure, pay and recruitment
- *Career Ladder Opportunities Act* — which would introduce performance pay
- *Autism Scholarship Act* — a voucher scheme for students with disabilities. (See also *Special Needs Scholarship Program Act*)
- *Education Savings Account Act* — withdraws funds that would have been allocated to a local public school for a parent to use elsewhere



Murdoch's encroachment into the education 'business'

- *Family Education Tax Credit Program Act* — tax breaks for individuals and corporations
- *Great Teachers and Leaders Act* — allows schools to revoke tenure of a teacher based on student achievement data
- *Virtual Public Schools Act* — allows for the establishment of virtual schools.

It would probably surprise very few people that some of Rupert Murdoch's companies are members of ALEC. In 2011 Murdoch, a strident critic of public schools, bought ALEC corporate member Wireless Generation for \$360 million. After negative publicity, Wireless Generation folded into Amplify as the acceptable face of Wireless Generation and is now a subsidiary of News Corporation. As its website proclaims, "Amplify is making personalised learning — the focus of *Race to the Top* — an attainable reality for school districts". Amplify is in the business of selling tablets pre-loaded with software to schools and school districts. In this one example we see the intersection of corporate interests, political lobbying and government policy.

As Murdoch said, "When it comes to K through 12 education, we see a \$500 billion sector in the US alone that is waiting desperately to be transformed by big breakthroughs that extend the reach of great teaching".⁵³

Soon afterwards, Murdoch hired the former schools chancellor of New York City, Joel Klein, to head the educational technology arm of News Corporation.

Notes

49 The Heritage Foundation: Wikipedia 12 March 2014

50 p3 Exposed: the State Policy Network (Center for Media and Democracy)

51 American Legislative Exchange Council Wikipedia 12 March 2014

52 Julie Underwood *ALEC Exposed: Starving Public Schools* 14 July 2011 commondreams.org

53 <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/09/ruPERT-murdoch-news-corp-wireless-generation-education>

Step by Step

Step by step the longest march
Can be won, can be won.
Many stones can form an arch,
Singly none, singly none.
And by union what we will
Can be accomplished still.
Drops of water turn a mill,
Singly none, singly none.⁵⁴

One of the dangers for public school teachers is to disregard what has happened over the last thirty years with education policy. If as teachers we forget our history, we might as well surrender our greatest asset, our intellectual independence, and instead become the “compulsive twitch” de Antonio described all those years ago. As US historian Howard Zinn writes, “What we learn about the past does not give us absolute truth about the present, but it may cause us to look deeper than the glib statements made by political leaders and the ‘experts’ quoted in the press”.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, the “glib statements” of politicians and “experts” at countless media conferences have often become government policy. The result is three to four decades of experimentation that has led to specialist and academic selective schools, models of governance built around the rhetoric of “autonomy” that include charters, academies and “independent public schools”, funding cuts, vouchers, privatisation, merit pay, punitive performance appraisal schemes, salary freezes, loss of tenure, attacks on teacher qualifications and high-stakes testing regimes used to perpetuate the notion of “failure”.

In recent history, very few major educational initiatives of governments in Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK, as well as in other countries, have been designed to enhance teaching and learning. Indeed, many have been introduced, against the advice of the profession, to seriously weaken public education systems. Few ideas that state and national education departments disseminate are politically neutral any more. In countries such as Australia we no longer have education departments run by independent public servants. At both the state and federal level all senior public servants have become political appointees, more often than not taking up their positions after a clean sweep initiated by an incoming government, with the loss of institutional memory being one serious consequence.

At best, the new senior department managers might have an educational background, but the introduction of performance contracts that replace security of tenure has meant that the loyalty to the politician who placed them on the contract gives the political party in gov-

ernment the advantage, creates a personal conflict of interest and denies the vast numbers of employees within the public education system an independent adviser to government. This politicisation of the public service has roughly coincided with the period of the false education “reform” agenda that has dominated educational debate and placed the real education experts, teachers, on the defensive.

The experienced senior public servant and former secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Sir Lenox Hewitt, summed up the dangers of the loss of an independent civil service capable of giving “frank and fearless” advice to government:

“... [T]he intention [is] to change, indeed to destroy, the Australian Public Service and to convert it into a series of appointments at pleasure — at the whim, in the case of secretaries, of the prime minister; in the case of agency heads, of the minister; and, in the case of employees, of the secretaries of departments. That to me is a fundamental change in the service that was established.⁵⁶”

Education has always been an area of public policy hotly contested. After all, it has been where the tensions between church and state have been, and are still, played out, where individual privilege keeps defending its territory from encroaching ideas of public good and where social conservatives have consistently attempted to intervene in the school curriculum. But the last three to four decades has seen a much more organised, coherent and well-funded campaign underpinned by the ideology of the market. It is this influence of neo-liberal ideology that is having the most dramatic effect on public education as it is so much more than just a contest of ideas.

We are experiencing massive structural changes that have a profound effect on who and how we teach, and what we teach. “Education reform” is not driven any longer by educators to any great extent but rather by corporations and the new breed of managers who control them; and powerful and wealthy individuals, the think-tanks they fund, the media they control and the politicians they back.

For some years now the Right has viewed public education as a serious political threat because the fundamental truth for neo-liberals is that the market will always produce better outcomes. For this ideological position to be sustained public enterprises, whether they are schools or hospitals or postal services or transport systems, must never be allowed to succeed. It is one reason why, in government, neo-liberals under-fund and run down public services: it is essentially a deliberate strategy to make the public more receptive to privatisation.

In Australia, government policies to restructure public education systems based on market theory date back to the 1980s. They have all been launched with accompanying glossy brochures and catchy titles:

- *Better Schools*, Western Australia (1987)
- *Schools Renewal*, New South Wales (1989)
- *Schools of the Future*, Victoria (1993)
- *Directions for Education*, Tasmania (1996)
- *Leading Schools*, Queensland (1997)
- *Independent Public Schools*, Western Australia (2009)

- *Empowering Local Schools*, Australia (2010)
- *Local Schools, Local Decisions*, New South Wales (2012)
- *Independent Public Schools*, Queensland (2013)

The New Zealand Government's model, *Tomorrow's Schools*, was introduced in 1989.

The Western Australian experiment with Independent Public Schools has significance at a national level with the election of the conservative Coalition Government in 2013 as its policy is to spread the model to public schools throughout Australia. The reality is that the WA Independent Public Schools model never had its origins in education theory. Rather it was the creation of the WA Government Economic Audit Committee's (EAC) report, *Putting the Public First*. This was a report that unveiled massive changes to management structures across the entire WA public service, not just for schools.⁵⁷

There is now a responsibility for each generation of teachers to learn the background to these seismic policy shifts, starting with recent history. Their capacity to advance the teaching profession and protect the public education system will be dependent on this knowledge. In this respect, teachers' unions must play a critical educative role. It will be our willingness to learn from the past, combined with our capacity to organise within our communities, which will be essential if we are to continue to resist and defeat the powerful anti-democratic forces that are attacking public education.

US historian Howard Zinn, echoing Gramsci, wrote, "Pessimism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it reproduces itself by crippling our willingness to act".⁵⁸ But there is cause for optimism.

In Australia, the extraordinary level of government funding provided to private schools at the expense of the public system has deep historical roots dating back to the early 1960s when State Aid was introduced. The fight to secure a fairer funding model for schools, the *I Give a Gonski* campaign, saw the mobilisation of public school communities in numbers without precedent. Extensive use of social media encouraged the involvement of a new generation of younger teacher activists. Community-based campaigning, the "willingness to act", combined with high-quality resources, mean schools funding now dominates education policy debate at the national level.

For proponents of public education it was a difficult and dispiriting struggle for many years against powerful vested interests. But armed with the history, and passing the baton to each new generation of activists, teachers have shown that "Step by step the longest march / Can be won". With the resources of the combined public school state-based teacher unions, co-ordinated by the Australian Education Union, the campaign shifted the thinking of the Australian public.



For advocates of public education, it has been a dispiriting struggle in recent years

In his book, *Education Under Siege*, the English education academic, Peter Mortimore, finishes with this call:

“Well-organised opposition can be overcome only by a mass desire for a fair education system, serving the interests of all society, led by determined campaigners. Readers, create the opportunity for an ‘education spring’ and do your part in building an education system — and a society — worth leaving to your children and your grandchildren.”⁵⁹

This will not be an easy task, but “by union what we will / Can be accomplished still / Drops of water turn a mill / Singly none, Singly none”. To succeed, there is no doubt we will need to make history.

But we must also find time to write the history for, as others have argued, the struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

Notes

54 From the preamble to the 1863 constitution of the American Mineworkers Association

55 Zinn p684

56 Sir Lenox Hewitt

57 Fitzgerald, Scott and Rainnie, Al

58 Zinn quoted in Loeb p70

59 Mortimore, p241

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