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IN PRAISE OF THE
SECULAR IDEAL IN
AUSTRALIA'S PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

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Having been raised in a religious belief, as an Anglican Christian of the Protestant tradition of the Sydney Diocese, I understand the value of religious instruction when one is young. I acknowledge the utility of a spiritual preparation for life and of ethical enlightenment. In every society, every day, problems are presented to us that require moral choices to be made. So how do we face up to that necessity in Australia's public schools? We do so by observing the principle of secularism. Whatever may be our beliefs in our hearts and at home, when we enter the school gates, we acknowledge the space that must be left for private convictions. We do not attempt to force upon immature children, or school staff, a particular religious conviction. Their religion, if any, is their private business.

In public schools, the compromise with the opponents of public education in the Australian colonies of the 1870s and 80s led New South Wales to include an obligation, by law, to provide the churches every week an hour to give scripture instruction to their followers. This remains the law. I attended scripture classes at my school. As fate would have it, I have kept in touch with my scripture teacher, Revd. Dr. Stuart Barton-Babbage, one time Anglican Dean of Sydney and later Melbourne. He was, and is, an inspired communicator. Not all scripture teachers are so gifted or discerning.

In public schools today, about 50% or 60% of students in later years do not attend these scripture classes. Until now, they have been put in other classrooms and left to their own devices. Colouring-in or early dismissal to go home has been the way this shift in demographics has been managed.

In 2009, the Premier of New South Wales, Mr. Nathan Rees, announced the intended introduction into public schools of ethics courses based on a programme prepared by the St. James Ethics Centre. These courses will be an alternative to 'scripture'. They will allow instruction in *secular* ethical systems; but also with proper references to the moral principles of diverse religions. One might consider this a specially useful development in multi-cultural and multi-religious Australia. I applaud this initiative. Yet, it stands beside the continuation of a subvention of millions of dollars announced by Prime Minister Rudd in 2009, to pay for religious chaplains in public and other schools. In this, the federal government maintained the large benefits for religious bodies operating in public schools, started by the previous government, arguably challenging the principle of the separation of churches from the state in societies such as ours.

It is good to have competing moral principles taught and debated in our schools. It is not good to envisage religious instruction that denies all knowledge about controversies that the students will have to face on leaving the school gates. Or knowledge about the universal rights of women. Or knowledge about the existence of homosexuals and their basic rights. Or knowledge about the debates concerning *in vitro* fertilisation and therapeutic cloning of human cells. Or awareness of the conflicting views that exist in our society about abortion. Or knowledge of HIV and the use of condoms to reduce its spread. Or appreciation of the great diversity of Australia which is one of the strengths of our country and not a weakness.

In 2009, I learned to my surprise that teachers in some Australian religious schools are actually dismissed because they fall pregnant whilst not married. Or because they are revealed as gay. Or of students who are removed from school because of their sexuality. Such exclusions cannot happen in a secular school. They cannot occur in public education.

We must build in Australia a diverse, creative and aware nation, alert to the dilemmas of competing moral and ethical principles that beset humanity. This can, of course, be achieved in religious and private schools, so long as they too are open to instruction and discussion about different value systems, beliefs and opinions. But it is more likely to happen, I suggest, in public schools: non-denominational, non-dogmatic and secular. This is not a denial of religion. I happen to cherish my own religion. But it is an assignment of the religious dimension to a private space and an insistence on the recognition that, in that private space, we must all be aware and respectful of competing religious and ethical beliefs.

What a debt Australia owes to the founders of public education. They had to face strong opposition at the time, mainly from churches and private investors that had earlier enjoyed predominance in colonial schooling. Public education had to negotiate compromises by which limited classes for 'scripture' were permitted as a 'trade off' for non-denominational education. It had to endure the scoffing of those who thought that education was properly a privilege for the wealthy and that public schools were the dire results of 'socialism'. But in the late 19th century, a great movement swept Australia to establish the public education system. It was a movement that coincided with our nation's

advance to federation. It was anchored in three great principles stated in the early *Public Education Acts*. Such education would be free, compulsory and secular.

I believe that a large part of the success story of Australia as a modern nation can be traced to the establishment of public schools across our continental country, based on these principles. To them, in the 20th century, were added two more principles. These involved the inculcation of the values of egalitarian democracy, upon which our federal government itself was founded. And the embrace of the principle of excellence, so that public education would offer schools and learning as good as, and better than, the most expensive private and religious schools.

During my 13 years of service on the High Court of Australia, completed in 2009, I was, for most of the time, the only Justice of the Court whose entire education was received in public schools. Now Justice Susan Keiffel is in the same position. One out of seven. Like Prime Minister Rudd, Prime Minister Howard and Prime Minister Hawke, I was educated throughout in public schools.

In my case, I attended the local infants' school at North Strathfield in Sydney. Later I graduated to the 'big school' in the 1880s building that still stands on Concord Road in Sydney. My years there coincided with the closing battles of the Second World War and the post-war era. We lived under the threat of the mushroom cloud that burst over Hiroshima in 1945. I had wonderful teachers and also the stimulus of a cross-section of the Australian children of those days. We were then a microcosm of White Australia, as we waved the Union Jack to the

parade of khaki ambulances travelling up the road outside the school to the Repatriation General Hospital nearby. It was a different era. However, the quality of education was outstanding. My debt to my teachers and to my fellow students is deep. I will never cease to acknowledge it.

In my high school, we were constantly reminded of our famous *alumni*, of their public service and of our obligation to go and do likewise. Sir Edmund Barton, Sir Douglas Mawson, Dr. H.V. Evatt, Sir Garfield Barwick. The list was very long and we were all proud of it. I still am.

Earlier this year, my eyes caught the lead item in the *Sydney Morning Herald*¹ on how an outstanding Australian scientist, removed by President G.W. Bush from the United States Council on Bioethics, was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize for Medicine. She won the prize for her participation in the discovery of telomeres, enzymes that protect chromosomes in human body cells. Her discovery raises the prospects of important breakthroughs in the treatment of cancerous cells. The report stated that the prize winner, Elizabeth Blackburn, born in Tasmania, had come to Melbourne and attended public schools, including University High School. She topped the State of Victoria in three matriculation subjects. So she is a Nobel laureate, educated in public schools. Let us honour her and her teachers.

Earlier, Sir John Eccles, who won the Nobel Prize in 1963 for physiology, was educated at Warrnambool and Melbourne High Schools. Sir John Cornforth, Nobel laureate in 1975, was educated at Sydney Boys' High School. Professor Peter Doherty, Nobel laureate in

¹ A. Darby "Outspoken Australian Scientist Dropped by Bush Wins Nobel", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 2009, 1.

medicine in 1996, was educated at Indooroopilly High School in Queensland. All public schools. These are striking accolades for the products of public education in Australia. We need to remind ourselves of them when celebrating the latest successes of public schools.

I am fed up with media, and some politicians, criticising public education in Australia. I am fed up with suggestions that public schools neglect education in values. I am fed up when I go to wealthy private schools, receiving substantial supplementary funding, and I see the neglect of the facilities of famous public high schools². Canterbury Boys' High School, in Sydney, was the school of the former Prime Minister, John Howard. A principal of a fine private school said to me recently that, in most other countries, the high school of a former Prime Minister would be celebrated and well endowed. Yet the funds in Australia have tended to flow in other directions. My own high school in Sydney, Fort Street High, lacks the swimming pools, manicured lawns and overpayments that seem to have ebbed away from public schools. I hope that this attrition will end and soon. It is unjust. It is undeserved, as the record of public school achievements demonstrate. The schools where 63% of young Australians are educated deserve better. The time has come for all citizens to make it clear that they demand an end to the underfunding of public education: where the future of the nation is chiefly written.

No one doubts the value of private and religious schools. Advocates of public education accept that choice is important. Pupils in private

² A. Patty, "Private Schools Win Special Cash Bonuses", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29-30 August 2009, 3. This reported that private schools will receive up to \$23 million each in federal over-payments over the next four years because of a commitment given by the previous government. Some such schools will receive up to \$15 million more than their entitlement under the funding formula that measures need according to socio-economic status. An internal Department of Education review in December 2006 reported that such special funding arrangements "entrench purely historical inequities". It was stated that the arrangements would be reviewed in 2010 before the next four year funding cycle.

schools are Australians too. Their parents and guardians are taxpayers. Some competition in education is a good thing, including for public schools. Australian Nobel laureates have also been educated at private schools. However, an imbalance has crept into the funding. It behoves those who enjoyed the benefits of public education in their youth to speak up for the schools that educate the majority of our citizens. They provide the melting pot of all races, cultures, religions and intellectual abilities. These are the schools that need vocal advocates and lobbyists to put their case to government.

It constantly amazes me that leaders of government in Australia, who themselves benefitted from public education, go along with the inequity in the distribution of public funds for schooling. Parents and citizens in public schools must learn the arts of advocacy. They must blog, twitter, text, lobby and argue. Be sure that the lobbyists for private and religious schools are highly skilled and well organised in this regard. They have certainly been more than rewarded in recent years. For the children in the nation's public schools, this lack of balance must stop.

Ultimately, what is at stake here is the future role of students from public education in the exercise of power in our country. Give them excellence and they will take it through life into positions of responsibility and influence. They will bring with them the values of public schools. In the High Court of Australia there will be more than one *alumnus*. And in other branches of government, in business, the arts, universities and international bodies, people trained in Australia's public schools will reflect the optimistic principles of secularism, tolerance, democracy and excellence that lie at the core of public education in Australia. The best

of them will never forget the students and teachers with whom they shared the precious years of education. These special experiences gave me a life-long dedication to community involvement, social justice, equality of opportunity and human rights for all.

This is an edited version of speeches given at the Speech Days of Melbourne High School and Sydney Grammar School late in 2009.