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THE SUMMER HILL PUBLIC SCHOOL
CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS 1983
SUMMER HILL, SYDNEY, SATURDAY 6 AUGUST 1983

IN PRAISE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION - A HUNDRED YEARS ON

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The Hon Mr Justice M D Kirby CMG *
Australian Law Reform Commission

A HUNDRED YEARS ON

I came to this school in 1949. Until then, I had attended the North Strathfield Public School in Sydney. One day, in the middle of 1948, I was sitting in the class room of Fourth Class when a strange band of people appeared. They brought with them even stranger printed papers with tests to which the students were submitted. Fortunately, I was indifferent to the importance of this little test. Had I known the way it would shape my life, I would have taken it more seriously. I filled out the forms. Within weeks my mother was summoned to take me to the Education Department in Bridge Street to undergo a further elimination trial. This was a kind of 1948 equivalent to the America's Cup. Fortunately, there were no legal challenges. I passed the test and was selected for the Opportunity 'C' class at Summer Hill.

The fifth and sixth classes of my education were conducted in the Opportunity School. I was surrounded by talented lads of my own age : boys who had undertaken similar IQ tests in the public schools of the whole surrounding district.

Now, nothing is more tedious than the memories of ageing pupils as they return, most-eyed, to the fields of their youth. When I visit this school I remember:

* the school fete in 1949, when I consumed most of the toffees dutifully made by my mother for sale — bringing no great fortune to the school but instant and deserved illness upon myself;

* the end of 1949, when the school students became caught up in the electoral excitement as the wartime Labor Government approached its last days and the triumph of Robert Menzies arrived, ushering in the 23 years of Liberal Government;

* Personal views only

the one and only time I received the cane in my boringly dutiful and compliant schooldays. I was guilty of the heinous offence of tearing the centre pages out of a departmental exercise book. I had literally blotted my copy book -- for in those days we used nib and pen. To remove this blot, I tore out the offending pages. The headmaster, Mr Martin Gibbons, a small man with an exquisite sense of avoirduois picked up my book, found it to be light by two pages, brooked no explanation and administered four strokes of the cane. I can still feel the tingling pain on my fingers and the shame of this public humiliation. Perhaps that little event affected my approach to corporal and other punishment. Certainly it enhanced my fear of Mr Gibbons;

- * my first venture on the stage came at this school. For some reason I was always chosen to play a villain! But the smell of greasepaint and the attraction of the lights were seductive indeed. Some say they still remain with me.
- * Then, at the end of 1950, I stood under the great tree in the front of the school and was told that I had been selected for Fort Street High School. My short interlude at Summer Hill was finished. I had been asked by my parents what I wanted if I was chosen to get to Fort Street. Being, even in those days, a rather practical lad, I nominated an achievable prize -- ten shillings. There are some who allege that I still have that first ten shillings.

PUBLIC EDUCATION '83

This is not the occasion to go over the great debates about public education. There is no doubt that the years 1976 to 1982 saw a distinct shift in Federal funding away from public schools and in favour of private schools. I call them 'public' schools and not State schools or Government schools deliberately. Only schools such as Summer Hill, whose centenary we celebrate today, deserve the appellation 'public'. Only schools such as Summer Hill have been open, this past century, to all members of the public. It is true that there was a special class for bright children. But those bright children were chosen by equal competitive means from the public school system itself throughout the region. To enter that system there was no qualification of religion, wealth, social status, parental acceptability. Only the public school system offers open doors to every member of the Australian public. It continues to offer education to about 75% of Australia's population. People like me who took the benefits of that system should speak out in praise of public education. They should not forget the great intellectual, emotional and personal debt they owe to their teachers. They should pay tribute to the excellence of the education they received in public schools. They should defend the ideal of public education. Though there is room in our country for variety, experiment and difference, we should not forget the system of education that is open to all and that offers its benefits to the great majority of the young people : the future citizens of Australia.

EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

These words of mine are not intended to encourage complacency or an self-critical approach to public education. The decline in Federal funding coincided with something of a shift toward private education. That, in turn, evidenced a malaise in some sections of the community about the quality of education in public schools.

I was sent to Summer Hill, under the Opportunity School system, at a time when the public education system actively, even aggressively, promoted excellence in education. It streamed special students. It acknowledged the rights of clever children to have particular forms of education. It acknowledged the benefit of putting bright students in classes together so that they competed and encouraged each other. Just as the public education system must help students with learning problems, so, as it seems to me, it must aid and advance the talented and clever child.

There were, of course, weaknesses in the Opportunity system as it was organised in 1950 and in the selective High Schools that it serviced. These weaknesses included:

- * the lack of opportunity for lateral entry : once you missed the boat, you were out;
- * the concentration of the best teaching talent on the few;
- * the occasional promotion of snobbery and elitism;
- * the removal of the stimulus which bright students can give to the not-so-bright;
- * the failure to allow adequately for late developers;
- * the division of families and of schooltime friends.

These were doubtless the reasons for the decline and fall of the selective system of public high school education and the limitations on the Opportunity Schools. They were never much liked by the teacher unions and their weaknesses were all too apparent to the majority in a democratic community.

By the same token, I suspect that if our famous geneticist, Sir Macfarlane Burnet, were to look at our Australian education system, he would conclude that even bright students have rights and that our country, with a faltering economy and an uncertain place in the world, must not squander the limited pool of children of the highest genetic talent. On the contrary, it must mobilise that talent and ensure, for the sake of the whole country, that bright students flourish, though in a democratic context.

And so, in returning today to join in the celebrations of the first hundred years of Summer Hill School -- where I spent the formative years, 1949 and 1950, I hope that we may see a reconsideration of the special rights of clever pupils in our public schools. If we do so, our public schools will certainly continue to be the means by which the children of the poor and average citizens can proceed, by free, secular education, and become the leaders of our country. If we do not attend to this issue, I suspect that the drift from public education may continue. Parents will deprive themselves to secure, for clever children, what they perceive to be the highest standard of instruction. I would like to believe that the children of today and of tomorrow can receive, in the public system, the magnificent instruction I received ; including here at the Summer Hill Public School.