FEDERATION OF PARENTS' AND CITIZENS' ASSOCIATIONS

OF NEW SOUTH WALES

1985 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

TEACHERS' FEDERATION AUDITORIUM, SYDNEY

SATURDAY 27 JULY 1985

PUBLIC EDUCATION - A PLACE FOR EXCELLENCE?

3485

FEDERATION OF PARENTS' AND CITIZENS' ASSOCIATIONS
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

1985 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

TEACHERS' FEDERATION AUDITORIUM, SYDNEY

SATURDAY, 27 JULY, 1985

PUBLIC EDUCATION - A PLACE FOR EXCELLENCE?

The Hon. Justice M.D. Kirby, CMG
President of the Court of Appeal

TOP ACADEMICS

Like many of you I have been reading the instalments of the Smark Report on schools in the Sydney Morning Herald. Those of you who subscribe to other journals should be told that Mr. Smark (and a co-author) are producing what purport to be mid-year term reports on various schools in Sydney. So far, they appear to be concentrating on Roman Catholic and private schools.

On Thursday my eyes fell upon the report on the Sydney Grammar School. A "hot house for swots, a desert for sportsmen" declared the headline.[1]

The report told the now familiar tale of the concentration of this venerable and excellent school upon academic subjects. It also mentioned its new found attention to music and its apparent institutional disdain for 'manly sports' and the other activities so beloved Cecil Rhodes and the Christain Brothers schools reported on an earlier day.

But then my eyes fell upon a confident and arresting

assertion:

"Grammar is undoubtedly Sydney's top academic school"

Reading this assertion (which seems apparently unarguable on the record of the Higher School Certificate achievements last year) took my mind back to earlier days. But no so much earlier. The days thirty years ago, and a little more, when I was at school.

How different things were in those days of the recent past. It is precisely thirty years ago this year since I was completing the Leaving Certificate of Fort Street Boys' High School (as it then was). At this time, thirty years ago I was in the midst of preparation for Play Day - that thesbian activity of Fort Street which had trained the Wrans, Barwicks, Kerrs, Evatts and others of our society. Within a few weeks I would face the examiners who would test me sorely in my knowledge of Julius Caesar, iambic pentameter, the hypotemuse and irregular German verbs. Thirty years ago no Smark Report would have said - at least with accuracy - that Sydney Grammar School was the top academic school of the State. That laurel would have been handed, in all probability, to North Sydney Boys' High School. If not to them, then to Fort Street or to Sydney High School. Or to Homebush Boys' High School, Canterbury Boys High School or other schools of the public school system.

In those days, there were published the top one hundred students judged by the Leaving Certificate. I do not have the schedule before me. It would make an interesting comparison of the proportion of public and private schools in the top one hundred or two hundred - then and now. I hope some PhD scholar will do the work.

But my clear recollection is that in the very year of my Leaving Certificate, Fort Street gained ten places in the top one hundred, to say nothing of North Sydney Boys' High School which at that time had a marginally stronger academic tradition. The State schools - the public schools - dominated the academic results. They offered as good and better academic and intellectual training than any private school.

Last year, I believe, Fort Street gained one student in the top two hundred. Sydney Grammar School collected an embarrassment of riches in its pupils gaining that prize. Hence Mr. Smark's accolade.

DOES IT MATTER?

You may say: does all this matter? Does it matter that Sydney Grammar School, with its venerable history and commendable tradition and policy of individualism is collecting the prizes? Well, in my opinion it does matter and I propose to say why.

Lest it be thought that this phenomenon, which I report, is some local development, confined to the demolition of a few elite schools in this State in which students enjoyed virtually a private education from the public purse, you should be told of like developments in England. England after all is the source of our academic tradition. This was strikingly put in the Smark Report about Sydney Grammar School.

> "If Geelong Grammar is Australia's Eton, then Sydney Grammar is its Winchester."

Well, if Sydney Grammar is our Winchester the public schools (such as Fort Street and North Sydney) were the secondary modern schools of England and Wales.

Earlier this month, when I was in England, my eyes fell

upon an edition of The Times. I do not want you to think that I spend my whole life leafing through newspapers. But in the isolated world of the judiciary, they often provide our window to knowledge of what is happening out there.

In The Times of 15 July, 1985, there was the headline which struck me as having as having an Antipodean relevance -

> "Comprehensive schools lag behind selectives on exam results, study finds."[2]

The education correspondent of The Times was reporting on a second report titled "Standards in English Schools" by John Marks and Maciej Pomian-Srzednicki.[3] According to the report the study, published that day, showed "once again" that pupils in grammar and secondary modern schools achieved more O level passes than those in comprehensive schools. O level passes equate roughly to matriculation standard passes in this country.

The research also showed that examination results varied between comprehensive schools, even where they were in the same type of social area. There were also big differences between local education authorities with similar social backgrounds. The findings were based on the analysis of a 1982 examination for more than 2,200 schools. They were similar to earlier findings in a report published in 1983 by the same authors.

According to The Times report, the research, taken from a representative sample of 61 authorities, found that pupils in the counties remaining secondary modern and grammar schools, obtained between 30% and 40% more O level passes per pupil nationally, than those in the comprehensive schools. The authors state that these figures agree with the departmental results. Despite moves in Britain, similar to those that have occurred in

Australia, secondary modern schools are still doing particularly well in spite of having few pupils in the top ability ranges.

Now, of course, I am not an educational theorist. I have not conducted a detailed analysis and comparison of the Australian and British position. Others may be doing this. But I am a citizen with a role in, and an interest about, education. Because of my background and the great debt I myself owe to public education and to my fine teachers, I am especially interested in the fate of public education. I am particularly concerned about the plight of clever but poor children. This is a concern that arises from an anxiety about them individually. But more fundamentally it is a concern that arises from a reflection on the national interest. Every clever child who is not encouraged and helped to flourish - by parents and by schools - is a loss to our economy, our culture and our national life. In our current international situation, Australia cannot afford to squander the talents of the clever children of the poor.

Inevitably private schools, such as the Sydney Grammar School, tend to look after the clever children of the rich. Of course I make no complaint about this. Like most Australians nowadays, I believe that there is a place for diversity in education. In any case it seems here to stay. Private schools can act as a stimulus. By creativity and variety they provide alternative models. Freedom in a society such as ours nutures and guards diversity.

I also realise that some private schools, including Sydney Grammar School, provide scholarships - though they are relatively few in number. Generally speaking it is the children of the rich (or the comparatively well off or those whose parents

can and will make extra efforts and sacrifices) who get into the private school system. Such children will often, for genetic and social reasons have their talents maximised. Accordingly, the system tends to conspire to facilitate their special and privileged education.

But what of the clever child whose parent cannot send him to a special school? What of the clever child whose parent cannot afford private education, with all the direct and indirect costs that that involves? What of the clever Aboriginal child? The clever child of parents newly arrived from Vietnam whose stumble over the English language? The clever child of a remote outlying country district?

Thirty years ago we had an affirmative answer for many of these cases in the public education system. Such children were picked out of their primary school and at least in the metropolitan areas were sent to the special Opportunity Classes. Then, if they flourished, they were streamed to the special high schools which were the front of house, the show pieces of the public education system. Now, in the name of comprehensive education, this system has been, in large part at least, dismantled. And the process of dismantlement continues.

My thesis is that this is not a good development for clever children. It is not a good development for public education. But most importantly, it is not good for the health of our community. Let me develop these theses.

THE END OF SELECTIVITY

It is not good for the individual child because research now being done at the University of Newcastle demonstrates to my satisfaction, that such children have special needs.[4] They have

problems enough in coping with the difficulties of growing up, possibly misunderstood or their talents not fully appreciated by their parents, their siblings and their teachers. One can sympathise with the teacher in the comprehensive school. His emphasis, almost inevitably, is upon the progress of his class as a whole - at a steady rate. The high flier, who may in chronological age be the same as his class mates but who is intellectually months or years ahead may become bored, distracted if not properly stimulated. Because of our egalitarian tradition there are many hurdles for such a child to overcome. Many must be lost because they are not picked up and nurtured.

But the dismantlement of the selective schools and the streaming of talented children from poorer backgrounds, has had a detrimental effect on the public image of public education. You all know what I am referring to. In the days thirty years ago when I was at school (shortly to be followed there by the Minister, Mr. Cavalier) succeeding as we both did Mr. Wran, Dr. Evatt, Sir Percy Spender, Sir Douglas Mawson and the other fine luminaries - no one would have dared question the excellence of public education for the talented.

We have come a long way since then. The great principle of free, universal and secular education which began in the 1880's has been happily extended to larger and larger numbers of our peoples since the Wyndham scheme. That process needs to be taken further. Like England, we trail at the bottom of the OECD league in school retention. We need to step up our school retention for all. Never forget the basic statistics. At 17 years and 1 day Japan has more than 90% of its population still in education. The United States has more than 80%. We in Australia

have 39%. These figures are just not good enough. They are perhaps a reason for our comparative economic decline.

I am not against education for all. I am not opposed to the extension of education. On the contrary I believe that the technological and social circumstances of Australia require its rapid extension. What I am talking of is the special needs of the specially talented. What I am addressing is the capacity of the public education system to identify, select and stream the talented child so that he or she will secure as good an education as the community can give.

True it is, it should be an education that does not lose sight of democratic values. It should be an education that reinforces the sense of obligation of those receiving it and teaches the principle of service. I learned those obligations and principles at Fort Street. This is one reason why I am here today speaking for public education. Streaming is not elitism. It is not anti-democratic. On the contrary I declare it to be the sole means by which the talented child can gain his or her equal opportunity. Equal opportunity for the talented means an opportunity to flourish according to ability. That opportunity is denied if the child is held back - pressed into and held in a class of average ability when what is needed is the stimulus of other bright minds and teachers especially trained and sensitive to the particular needs of the gifted child.

I realise that in the old days there were many faults in the selective system, which I enjoyed. There was inadequate provision for lateral entry. There was inadequate attention to the general education of vast numbers of the rest of the community. Many students were forced into a model of secondary

education, appropriate for those proceeding to tertiary education but hopelessly inadequate or irrelevant in the provision of life skills for those who were not. I do not say that the system could not be improved. But for the sake of gifted students, the morale of public education and the true delivery of equal opportunity in education, I am convincend that more should be done to provide for the talented child in the public education system of today.

This argument also has a national and a community aspect. In the past, the streaming system of Fort Street, Sydney High, North Sydney and so on produced the high road by which children of poorer parents were directed by the public education system to as good and better education for their needs and talents than anything Sydney Grammar or other private institutions could provide. If you look around the Parliament, the judiciary, the doctors of Macquarie Street, the academics, the thinkers, the culture leaders of our country, at least those coming from this State were the product of this democratising selection of talent. Mr. Wran went to Fort Street, as I have said. But so did Mr. Dowd. Mr. Hawke went to the Perth Modern School (the local equivalent in the public education system of Western Australia). Mr. Howard went to Canterbury Boys High School.

What will happen twenty years from now? This is not the nostalgic question of an Old Boy, in his cups, anxious about a rear guard defence of the school tradition. It is a concern about the continuing capacity of the public education system to facilitate the special education of the bright and talented - so that they will enter our universities with equal preparation for leadership. I for one have always seen the old system as a

healthy corrective to a society based on class or wealth - where people cannot escape their parents' caste. We in Australia had developed a system which promised equal opportunity for some, at least, according to talent. I am concerned that that system should not be thrown away, negligently on the basis of dogmatic (and in my view misguided) views about elitism and democracy.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

Last week I read the paper on Public Education issued by the Education Commission of New South Wales in May, 1985.[5] The paper reviews, with proper pride, the achievements of public education between 1880 and 1985. It recounts the dramatic changes that occurred in the 1960's when the Wyndham scheme changed the secondary school from a selective purpose to a comprehensive one. When it deals with equality of opportunity, the paper rightly draws attention to the fact that the equality of provision of resources may itself be an inadequate objective (because it makes invalid assumptions about the nature of the receivers).[6]

> "The challenge of educators is to ensure that equality of opportunity extends past simple assessments of access to services to the enhancement of the conditions of that access so that the individual can receive maximum benefits from those services."

The Commission asks that the community should recognise that support for public education is a function of the concern of society for all of its members. I agree with this concern. And I respond to the request, as a citizen should. However, I ask in return that public education should heighten its concern for those with special needs. Of course, they include those with mental and physical handicaps. It also includes the average who

need the development of curricula that are more attractive to them, that encourage them to stay in education and that are of greater relevance to their experience in life in a changing world.

But then there are the talented and the gifted. Any public education system that seeks to submerge them in the mass and to neglect their special needs, forfeits a measure of support and respect. The message must go out loud and clear. A public education such as we have long offered in this State and such as we should offer in democratic Australia is one that also pays attention to the needs of the gifted and talented. This is seen in some quarters as an unfashionable message. It is a message that is presented by some as "elitist" and "undemocratic". Whereas its true purpose is precisely the opposite. It is to ensure equal opportunity for the individual. It is to ensure against the future dominance of our society by a minority who are educated in the private sector. It is to ensure that, as in the past, public education can claim the defence of democratic values, the sound education of the majority; but also attention to the special need of the special child.

I trust that if I am ever again invited to address this Conference I can report to you that a school in the public education system is "undoubtedly Sydney's top academic school" and by common consent is seen as such. It was so once. Let it be so again.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sydney Morning Herald, 25 July, 1985, p 4.
2. The Times (London) 15 July, 1985, p 3.
3. J. Marks and M. Pomian-Srzednicki, Standards in English Schools-Second Report. The Sherwood Press, London.
4. E.J. Braggett, Meeting the Needs of Parents of Gifted and Talented Children, Newcastle 1983 - See also M.D.Kirby, 'Bright Children Have Rights'. Address Adelaide, 18 June, 1985.
5. Education Commission of New South Wales "Public Education", May, 1985.
6. ibid, p 2.