

THE THREE FEDERATIONS

NSW FEDERATION OF SCHOOL COMMUNITYORGANISATIONS  
FEDERATION OF PARENTS & CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION OF NSW  
NEW SOUTH WALES TEACHERS FEDERATION

PUBLIC EDUCATION DAY - 29 AUGUST 1987

PUBLIC EDUCATION: REALITIES AND MYTHS

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PUBLIC EDUCATION DAY - 22 AUGUST 1987

PUBLIC EDUCATION: REALITIES AND MYTHS  
The Hon. Justice Michael Kirby, CMG\*

Dedicated to the memory of Lionel Murphy - a stalwart  
champion of public education in Australia - on his birthday

FOR OUR TEACHERS

I am here because I am proud to say that I had my education in public schools. And let us call them "public" schools. They are not "government" schools. They are the schools which are open to every member of the "public". Only the public schools open their doors to every child, regardless of religion (or lack of religion), parental wealth or other criterion.

I had a wonderful education. It began with Mrs. Church's kindergarten. It sailed through the North Strathfield Infants and Primary School. It diverted to Summer Hill Opportunity School. It reached its apogee at Fort Street High School. My teachers were gifted and dedicated. I still see some of them though, sadly, in the cycle of life they pass on, as we all must. But they leave an indelible mark on us, second only to our parents. In Kipling's words their work:

"Continueth,  
Broad and deep continueth  
Great beyond their knowing."

How many citizens in good jobs ever thank their teachers? Whether educated in public, private or Catholic schools, very few bother to say "thanks" to their teachers. My advice to my fellow citizens is to pick up their pen - just as they did, for the first time, on that sunny February morning many years ago at the beginning of a new school year. They should write to a teacher and express their thanks. Perhaps they will not now use an ink well, nib and blotter as they did then. I suppose, only judges use such antiquated equipment today. But it would be timely to express appreciation to the teachers who affected your life. And if they have passed away or cannot be found, we should think of them. And we should think of their successors who have, in their trust, the breathtaking responsibility of preparing the next generation of Australians, so that they will be ready for a changing world.

In a sense, that is why I am here today. To express my thanks to public education - to the teachers and the unknown Department bureaucrats who gave me an education of high civilisation, sensitivity and inquisitiveness. I am today largely what my family and teachers made me. Too few public leaders bother to say thanks. It is time that those who received the benefits of public education spoke out in its support, particularly when they hear proponents of private education call their schools "mediocre".

#### FIVE REALITIES

Support is needed because of the myths that are about:

ghosts of prejudice which need to be laid. But there are also some realities which have to be faced up to. I want to talk of the realities and myths of public education in our country, as we approach our third century.

The first reality is that there is a drift to private education. When I was at school 79% of our citizens were educated in public schools. This has dropped to 73%. There has been a 6% swing to private education and it is continuing. Such a large change, in a relatively short time, has the portents of lesson for supporters of public education. In a free society, variety is a strength, not a weakness. But if the "market" in education is continuing to shift to private facilities, that must say something which supporters of public schools should be alert to. It may be based on prejudice, misconception and error. But it shows a mood and a perception which is about that we must tackle. And not aggressively or defensively but in the spirit of intellectual honesty. We must do so with rigour and self criticism.

Secondly, there is undoubtedly dissatisfaction in some quarters with public education. It was shown in a poll commissioned by the Australian Teachers' Federation.<sup>1</sup> Though this poll found that roughly equal numbers of public and private school parents thought their children's schooling was "successful", a far greater number of private school parents thought it was "very successful". Perhaps it would have been interesting to conduct the poll amongst the pupils rather than the parents. However, there is no doubt that many citizens feel that private schools do better in HSC preparation and discipline and have more attention to so called "basics". Many

parents said they would send their children to private schools if only they could afford to. This is the most worrying finding. In days of disillusionment, it suggests that public education is a "second best" option when we should make it a preferred choice. Not all of these fellow citizens will be wrong in their perceptions. We must examine ourselves to understand their attitudes.

The third reality is that school retention in Australia has been low by the standards of our competitors. Senator Button recently said that "the current education and training system is not adequately serving national economic objectives."<sup>2</sup> He diagnosed the problem as based upon the fact that our educational system has developed over past decades to serve a "protected, cosseted industry structure" which is, at last, changing. Our school retention is still poor by OECD standards, though the Federal Government has waged a remarkable campaign, supported by the State Government, to turn our shocking figures around. For the Australia of the next century, we must improve the opportunities in education of young women; we must improve training in science and mathematics and for technology; we must lift standards and self expectations and keep more people at school longer. If we do not do this, we will truly become the "poor whites of Asia". The symptoms are already there.

The fourth reality is that, since the Menzies and Whitlam governments, there has been a great shift to public funding of private education. 56% of the funds provided by Federal education appropriation goes to the 27% of children in private schools. Only 44% goes to the 73% of children in public

schools.<sup>3</sup> These figures can be misleading. One can do anything with statistics. As well, parents of children in private schools dip into their own pocket to nearly 50% of the funds necessary for the education of their children. And their children are Australians too, entitled to the best in education. The parents are taxpayers, often in the high bracket. The objective is no longer the dull hand of one system. But there must be equity. When we see an expensive swimming pool or sporting complex, in a private school and the shortages sometimes present in public schools, the questions of equity and of priorities, are raised.

The fifth reality is that students today, in all branches of the education system, are under greater pressure than their forebears.<sup>4</sup> This is a result of the enormous technological, economic and social changes which have occurred in recent decades. We expect much of our young people - and of those who educate them.

#### FIVE MYTHS

If these are some of the realities, what are the myths?

The first myth is that held by parents - that things were invariably better in their day. There is a natural inclination towards nostalgia and self satisfaction. Many parents are totally ignorant of what actually goes on at school today. They are unaware of the language laboratories, science facilities, computer equipment, music and dramatic opportunities that now abound in public education. Furthermore, many guilt ridden parents, perhaps in the midst of mid life crisis and perceiving their own inadequacies, think that the only solution is brutal discipline. The cane was abolished throughout Europe by

Napoleon. But it has survived in Australia into our own age. This is a symbol of a prison mentality. Perhaps it goes back to the First Fleet.

The second myth is that all our problems in education would be better if only there was more government funding. In our present economic predicament, it is plain that we must all make sacrifices and work towards a better national economic infrastructure. The notion of a "pot of gold", with limitless capital is hard to extirpate in Australia. But our citizens are gradually realising that we have been living beyond our means. The issue now, and for the foreseeable future, is primarily going to be how do we spend our education dollar more effectively, rather than how do we get more dollars.

The third myth is that public funding of private schools will one day go away because it is inequitable or wrong in principle. Whether or not we should have embarked upon such funding particularly of religious schools, is a battle that was fought and lost in Australia. Public education must live with private education. My education in public schools was as good (and I would say better) than contemporary students received for high fees in private schools. We should make that our aim - to boast that parents and students choose public education because it can respond to their diverse needs.

The fourth myth is that we have the best public education system in the world. That is a myth that breeds complacency. Senator Button's warning and the OECD figures show that we have a long way to go. Our education system must adjust rapidly, particularly in curricula, to the rapidly changing need of a technologically advanced society. This will not be easy to

accomplish. There will be bureaucrat inertia and the impediment of changing course involving teachers with tenure, equipment, facilities and so on. But change we must if we are to survive alongside Taiwan, Korea, Singapore and other competitors in our region.

Fifthly, the principle of diversity must be accepted wholeheartedly within the public education system. I realise this is difficult to accomplish because of the large bureaucracy involved. Next to the judiciary, the railways and the Church, our public educational bureaucracy may be the most traditional in the community. It needs the injection of the same spirit of adventure which infused the founders of public education a hundred years ago. The challenge is quite as great. It is nothing less than the preparation of Australia for very different political, economic and technological times.

That makes it important to look after the disadvantaged - whether intellectually or physically in our schools. It makes it important to provide full opportunities for the mainstream. But it is essential that public education should also provide a stream for the talented. I realise that the definition of "talent" is debatable. Choosing the "talented" is controversial and sometimes hurtful.<sup>5</sup> There is no perfect system. But there are systems of selection. To abandon an objective which is just and desirable because it is difficult to attain is defeatism triumphant. Talented children have rights, including in public education. Providing specially for those rights is not elitism. It is equal opportunity in education. Moreover it is essential for the progress of our country. Their contribution to our future society is disproportionately great. All of our

competitors stream and nurture their talent.

In addition, there are two important strategic points which must be realised by the supporters of public education. They are that, whether we like or not, the selective schools remain the "front of house" for the public education system. They are, in many ways the standard bearers. It is their results that are compared to Sydney Grammar and SCEGGS. There should be more, not fewer, of them. They should show the community, as Fort Street did in my day, that public education can offer to those who want, and need, an academic training a schooling which is better than that on offer, for fees, in private education. I say quite bluntly that, if in 1951 I had had a choice, I would have chosen public education at Fort Street in preference to every private school then offering. No question about it.

The second strategic point is that, in the past, the selective schools of the public education system, were the nurturing ground of the future leaders of the country. They provided a rapid transit - a "fast lane" - often for students from backgrounds of disadvantage, to positions of leadership. What concerns me, in the shift to private education and the phasing out of opportunity and selective schools, is that fewer leaders in the future may come from the public system. It would be a matter of concern if they came, disproportionately, from the private system, perhaps infused with commercial or other minority values.

Above the Old Bailey in London is the Biblical injunction:  
"Defend the widows and the children of the poor".

Public education exists for the children of all. But it serves, especially, the children of the poor, of the outback, of the urban sprawl, of the ethnic minorities.

I salute all who are engaged in public education. Public Education Day is not a day for complacent self satisfaction. It is a day for self critical scrutiny. Properly administered, such scrutiny can promote improvement and strength in a system which has already many laurels round its brow.

FOOTNOTES

- \* Chancellor of Macquarie University. President of the Court of Appeal. Views expressed are personal views.
- 1. See A. Susskind, "Into the Battle for State Schools", Sydney Morning Herald, 11 May 1987.
- 2. See R. Garran, "Education Changes are Vital, says Button", in Age, 25 July 1987, p 3. Cf "Cain criticises key paper on direction of schools" Age, 27 August 1987, p 1.
- 3. Cited Susskind, ibid.
- 4. See R. Luna's study on IQ reported Sydney Morning Herald 28 August 1987, p 3.
- 5. See eg M. Law, "No Argument Remains for Selective Schools" in Sydney Morning Herald, 25 August, 1987, p 14.