

SCHOOLS POLICY

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The foundations of Labor's policy on schools were laid almost exactly half a century ago when the Whitlam government and its 'Karmel' report (Interim Committee 1973) set up 'the system' as we now know it: generous 'state aid' for non-government schools (provided by both state and federal governments); 'national leadership' by the Commonwealth on the back of its substantial funding; two levels of government involved in each of three sectors in all six states (and now two territories); and the whole in nominal pursuit of high-minded national objectives including particularly equality of group outcomes and equal opportunity for all.

All this was accepted by the Hawke/Keating governments and its ministers Susan Ryan and then John Dawkins. The Rudd/Gillard governments liked to talk about their education 'revolution' which, for Gillard, meant a revolution in schooling. It turned out to be a rickety edifice constructed on the Karmel foundations: national as well as international standardised testing of 'the basics'; a new national website (MySchool) to deliver 'transparency' and 'accountability'; two new institutions (ACARA and AITSL)¹; the new device of National School Reform Agreements (NSRAs); various 'initiatives' to lift 'effectiveness' and 'teacher quality'; a plan for 'needs-based' funding ('Gonski'); and a new vocabulary of 'outcomes', 'accountability', 'performance' and the like.²

The Albanese government and its education minister Jason Clare have shown no sign of wanting to depart from either Karmel or Gillard. Moving

¹ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

² For an excellent account of the 'revolution', see: Savage (2021).

Ashenden, D. (2024)
'Schools Policy'
Journal of Australian Political Economy
No. 92, pp. 106-12.

cautiously, Clare has taken the sector system and the Commonwealth role as givens, all but promised implementation of ‘Gonski’, postponed NSRA negotiations so that an ‘expert’ group could to ‘zero in’ on ‘real and measurable improvements’ for the disadvantaged particularly (Clare 2023) and fended off issues of the day with a scatter of grants and programs.

Clare’s early political weather is markedly more difficult than Gillard’s, however. Gillard could promise the earth (famously, that Australia would be in the OECD top 5 by 2025) and get away with it, for a while at least. Clare has to cope with the fact that Gillard’s ‘revolution’ was an unrelieved failure in every part and in the whole. By the revolution’s own measures – outcomes, teacher pay and morale, teacher quality and standards of entry to the profession, equality (however defined), social inclusion and cohesion – Australia’s schooling was going backwards when Labor came into office in 2007, was still going backwards when it left in 2013, and has continued to go backwards ever since.³

The critics

Labor’s schooling policies have had their critics ever since Whitlam’s glory days – witness, for example, Simon Marginson’s analysis of ‘the Karmel settlement’ in this journal (Marginson 1984), and the even more telling indictment issued in 1991 by Karmel’s principal author, Jean Blackburn:

We created a situation unique in the democratic world [and] it is very important to realise this. There were no rules about student selection and exclusion, no fee limitations, no shared governance, no public education accountability, no common curriculum requirements below upper secondary. We have now become a kind of wonder at which people [in other countries] gape. The reaction is always, ‘What an extraordinary situation’ (Greenwell and Bonnor 2022:14).

The critics have had little impact on policy until now, but the failure of the Gillard revolution - plus a Labor government apparently set to do it all again – has seen the critics grow in number and vehemence. At a recent symposium on ‘funding, equity and achievement’, speakers competed to document the most egregious of the many failures of the Gillard years.

³ For a summary of the evidence, see: Thomson (2021).

Tribal elders have been particularly severe. Prominent veterans Brian Caldwell and Alan Reid (both former deans of education) say that ‘Australian schools have hit the wall’ (Caldwell 2023) and need ‘a major overhaul’ (see also Reid 2019). A former minister for education in NSW, Verity Firth, wants to ditch more of the same in favour of ‘structural’ reform. Her Western Australian counterpart (and former Premier and Gonski panel member) Carmen Lawrence rages against the long tail of underachievement, rising segregation, pathetically narrow performance measures, the failure of new school planning, ‘deeply disturbing’ inequities and ‘huge’ differences in resourcing and opportunity. Barry McGaw, former CEO of Australia’s premier education research agency the ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research) and former head of education at the OECD, famously careful in his pronouncements, says bluntly that quality is declining, inequity is high, and the system ‘resistant to reform’.⁴ Geoff Masters, McGaw’s successor at the ACER, says that ‘deep reforms’ are ‘urgently required’ (Masters 2023).

Dissent is finding its way inside the tent. The ‘expert group’ asked to zero in on real and measurable improvements includes some who are deeply committed to that kind of language and approach and some who are not. Stephen Lamb, for example, led a major research project that found the school system failing on a much wider front than just outcomes in the basics (Lamb et al 2020). Another member is Pasi Sahlberg, the (Finnish) author of *Finnish Lessons* (Sahlberg 2011), who has been a long-standing and trenchant critic of what he labels GERM (Global Education Reform Movement), exactly the kind of thing Clare seems to endorse.

The critics have so far been more convincing in documenting failure than in understanding where it came from and what might be the implications for the future. Most explanations centre on specific policies pursued (or not pursued) and/or the simple wrong-headedness of governments and ‘policy-makers’.⁵ A more promising approach is in structural analysis, and specifically in understanding how successive federal Labor governments have elaborated and helped to entrench three structures that dominate

⁴ Firth, Lawrence and McGaw all spoke at a public forum following the ‘Funding, Equity and Excellence’ symposium convened by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in April of this year. See: <https://go.unimelb.edu.au/2oes>.

⁵ Exceptions include Savage (2021) and Greenwell and Bonnor (2022).

Australian schooling: the organisation of the industry as ‘sectors’; the organisation of work and workplaces; and the organisation of governance.⁶

Labor and the structures of schooling

On the first of these, the organisation of the industry, Karmel devised the terms on which each sector would operate with its own clientele, funding, regulation, governance and ethos, with consequences as pointed out by Jean Blackburn. Karmel also accepted the then-dominant (and still dominant) organisation of student and teacher work as a competition for places in a giant rank order. Indeed, Karmel provided that ‘grammar’ of schooling (Tyack and Tobin 1994) with the legitimating rationale of ‘equality of outcomes’. And third, Karmel endorsed and systematised the role of the Commonwealth in schooling, giving Australia the unique combination of two levels of government closely involved in each of the three sectors in all eight states and territories. These various elements of the Karmel settlement had been taken as givens by the Hawke and the Rudd/Gillard governments, as was noted above.

Of course, Labor could point to the circumstances it had to grapple with. Neither Whitlam nor Karmel invented the sector system; that was a legacy of the ferocious sectarianism of the 19th century Anglo-Protestant majority and its so-called ‘free, compulsory and secular’ assault on the even more sectarian Irish Catholic minority. Nor did Karmel make the States constitutionally responsible for schooling and then deprive them of enough money to deliver; that was the doing first of the federation’s founders and then of wartime taxation arrangements forced on the Curtin government in 1942 by the second world war. Much the same could be said of the organisation of work and the workplace, a grammar of schooling installed by the new departments of education in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, well-suited to basic schooling for all plus secondary schooling for a selected few, but wholly unsuited to extended secondary schooling for all, the problem as it became in the wake of schooling’s tumultuous expansion from the early 1950s.

⁶ This argument is elaborated in Ashenden (forthcoming).

On the other hand, it is also true that in none of these cases did Labor have a response of its own to circumstances given by history. When the Catholic system was on the point of collapse in the early 1960s the European answer – incorporation within a more generously defined public system – could have been Labor’s answer too but it wasn’t. Instead, it was the Church that thought the unthinkable, joining with the class, religious and ethnic enemy to ensure the survival of the sector system and thereby win an historic victory for Catholic schooling and an historic reversal for the secular public system. So too on the grammar of schooling, an interlocking arrangement of daily work and system-level regulation (industrial regulation particularly) and agencies. Karmel knew that this approach did not and could not work for mass secondary schooling but offered only ‘innovation’ and the injunction to ‘let a hundred flowers bloom’ (Interim Committee 1973: para 2.11) rather than a coherent alternative. And on governance, Whitlam was well-aware that entrenching the Commonwealth in schooling would complicate an already incompetent system but hoped that a new statutory authority (the Schools Commission) would sort it out. In practice, the Commission was yet another complication in both Canberra (where it was engaged in chronic turf warfare with the pre-existing Department of Education) and in each of the States, where its activities were resisted by the local departments and blurred responsibilities and accountabilities; by the mid-1980s it was gone. With the exception of the Gonski proposals – which Labor failed to implement – the Rudd/Gillard ‘revolution’ was not of Labor’s own devising. It was an off-the-shelf package – Sahlberg’s GERM – previously installed in school systems around the world, most recently by the Blair ‘New Labour’ governments in the UK.

Both the Rudd/Gillard and Whitlam governments must be credited with seeing that the problems of schooling were problems of the system as a whole to be tackled by reforms reaching across the whole. The choice of means, however, was limited by Labor’s alliance with imperial Canberra and its relatively superficial understanding of what made the system tick. The Gonski exception proves the rule; it was grounded in a sociology of social and cultural power rather than in the search for a more equal distribution of success (Teese 2011; Keating *et al.* 2011; Nous Group 2011). But Gonski has its own limitations; it is focused on funding to the exclusion of regulation – rules about choice by parents and selection of

students by schools that encourage two sectors to feed off the third⁷ – and it accepted that one in three of Australia’s schools should be governed by essentially private entities. Even on funding Gonski was modest, to say the least.

Structural reform?

It would be open to the Albanese government to treat the reinstatement of Gonski as a first rather than the last step in the reform of the sector system, to be followed up by measures tackling regulation and governance as well as pushing on with funding reform. That could in turn suggest how incremental reforms can be *structural* if conducted within a larger, long-term plan that includes fixing a dysfunctional system of governance and the failure-generating grammar of schooling. Such things have yet to be dreamed of in Labor’s philosophy. It is possible that a growing disillusionment with the path set by Gillard will fuel a larger and more politically capable way of thinking about what schooling can and should be. That might in turn be put at the disposal of the organised teaching workforce to support a top-down-bottom-up movement of the kind glimpsed in the ‘I give a Gonski’ campaign. That is a big ask; on present indications it is possible but unlikely.

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⁷ Some government schools have been encouraged in turn to feed off others via the real estate market and/or various under-the-table devices. One recent Victorian survey found that four in ten government school enrolments were ‘out of zone’.

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