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Democracy, ‘sector-blindness,’ and the delegitimation of dissent in neoliberal education policy

Leila Morsy, Kalervo Gulson, Matthew Clarke

School of Education, University of New South Wales

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Leila Morsy, University of New South Wales, School of Education. Goodsell Building, 1st Floor. Sydney, NSW, 2052. Australia. Email: l.morsy@unsw.edu.au

# Abstract

As a response to the 2013 special issue of *Discourse* on marketisation and equity in education*,* this paper suggestsit is important to understand how school sectors (independent, Catholic, and government) continue to play a significant role in how we constitute education, markets and equity in Australia. The first part of the paper provides a genealogy of school funding in Australia, giving an overview of how Australia has reached the current state of ‘sector-blind’ school funding. We focus on the shift in Australian schooling from a public good for national collective wellbeing to a private, positional good for individual advancement. The second part of the paper suggests that the notion of ‘sector-blindness’ is part of a depoliticisation of educational politics. We work from the premise that education is always and everywhere already a political project. We critique some absences in the special issue around ‘colour-blindness’ and in a coda to the paper, we provide the basis for renewing and politicising the debate about education policy by offering a ‘debate-redux,’ that provides some possibilities about forms of democratic politics and education.

# Introduction

I've often said that our commitments have been sector blind and I will keep saying it, because it's an important point to make. We have left behind the old divisive days of public versus private. Instead, this government is genuinely focused on making sure every Australian student, in every school, has access to the best possible education (Garrett, 2012).

This paper is written in conversation with, and as complement to, the *Discourse* special issue on marketisation and equity in education (2013). The special issue argues that equity and marketisation have become harmonious rather than antagonistic (Savage, Sellar, & Gorur, 2013). We would like to interrogate the idea of ‘sector-blindness,’ as former federal education minister Garrett says in the epigraph to this paper (henceforth, the epigraph), as an addition to work that aims ‘to describe and theorise how concepts of equity are operating in contemporary marketised education contexts’ (Savage, Sellar, & Gorur, 2013, p.164). We posit that it is important to understand the continued significant role that school sectors (independent, Catholic, and public/ government) continue to play as part of the educational politics of distribution, and the role of the sectors in constituting education, markets and equity in Australia.

The OECD uses the following categories for public and private schooling: Public schools can either be managed by an authority or governing body appointed by a public authority (known as ‘autonomous public schools). Private schools are classified as either government-independent private schools (receives less than 50% of funding from government) or government-dependent private schools (receives more than 50 % of its funding from government). Approximately 40% (or over 2000) of schools in Australia are private, with over half government-dependent (Musset, 2012). We suggest that, as school choice is a global concern, the Australian case has some salience for understanding, and perhaps provides caution about, how other nation-states may take up contemporary challenges of equity and markets.

As such, the first part of the paper provides a genealogy of school funding in Australia. We focus on the shift in Australian schooling from a public good for national collective wellbeing to a private, positional good for individual advancement. Funding is the site of sustained and virulent contestations over the politics of distribution in Australian schooling, and this section aims to provide one possible reading of how Australia has reached the state of ‘sector-blind’ school funding. The second part of the paper suggests that the notion of ‘sector-blindness’ is part of a depoliticisation of educational politics. In this section we work from the premise that education is always and everywhere already a political project. As Youdell notes in the opening line of her book, *School Trouble*, ‘schooling and politics are inseparable’ (Youdell, 2010, p.7). We describe an absence in the special issue around ethnicity and ‘colour-blindness,’ and in a coda to the paper, the ‘debate-redux,’ we provide a possible way of renewing and politicising the debate about education policy and democratic politics.

# Government support of private schools in Australia: A genealogy

Rizvi notes that one of the key characteristics of the papers in the *Discourse* special issue (2013) is that: ‘They do not simply assert that systems of education around the world have been dominated by market logic, as is often the case, but show how this is so’(2013, p.278). We complement the approaches of these papers, by analysing the school funding issue using genealogy, an approach that involves examining history and power and involving a critique ‘of ideas and practices that hide the contingency of human life behind formal ahistorical or developmental perspectives’ (Bevir, 2008, p272 & 274). A cultural genealogy aims to examine how culture oozes through time, to borrow a phase from Mukerji (2007, p.50) and focuses on the social construction of a problem. Nietzschean genealogy (Nietzsche, 1887), offers an opportunity to understand how cultural memory, or forgetfulness, shapes how society views a current phenomenon and its history. Foucault’s genealogies (1975, for example), focused on the often-invisible interplay between power, politics, and semiotics. In education policy studies, Foucault’s approach to genealogy has been extensively used by critical scholars (Ball, 1994; Ball, 2013). For Foucault, doing genealogical work

means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constraint, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all. To show that things ‘weren’t as necessary as all that’ (Foucault 1991 p.76, cited in Ball, 2013, p.33).

The following section offers a genealogical reading of education politics and policy to show how the current Australian school funding system and its connections to equity and marketisation is a contingent political construction that relates to previous debates but is nonetheless a singular contestable, and therefore changeable, condition. In part we wish to speak directly to Kenway’s recent paper *Challenging inequality in Australian schools: Gonski and beyond* (2013). Kenway’s emphasis is on the dynamic relationship between advantage and disadvantage in Australian schooling as students gain access to more advantaged non-government schools and move out of (mostly government) disadvantaged schools, thus further disadvantaging (or ‘residualising’ as current terminology puts it) the schools and students they leave behind.[[1]](#endnote-1) So it is impossible, she explains, to have an equitable educational system built on the premise of moving some students ahead of others ‘on the desire of each to profit at the expense of others’ (Marginson, 1997, p.280 cited in Savage, G. C., Sellar, S., & Gorur, R, 2013, p.163)or to myopically try to fix disadvantage without looking at its foil, advantage. She describes how the 2012 *Review of Funding for Schooling* (henceforth, Gonski Review) has taken the underlying system of government funding of private schools as *a priori* and immutable, and how the proposed reforms tinker at the edges of this problem. She notes, in relation to assumed *a prioris* like choice, that ‘of course, these are historical and ideological constructions; they are not fixed in stone’ (Kenway, 2013, p.289). The following discussion extends Kenway’s pursuit of unpacking the seemingly ‘intractable issue of inequality in Australian schools’ as related to funding and disadvantage. Specifically, we seek to demonstrate how the current funding system is indeed a ‘historical and ideological construction’ (Kenway, 2013, p.289) and to shine some light, through a genealogical reading of school funding in Australia, on how the political sphere and policymakers have come to assume this system is ‘fixed in stone’ (Kenway, 2013, p.289)

The Gonski Report (2012) and the resulting *National Plan for School Improvement* policy (Australian Government, 2013) are the latest iteration of a hundred and thirty-year history of incremental federal financial support of non-government schools. Federal support for non-government schools has been economically rationalised through supporting equity and redressing disadvantage. But, more intractable, thorny and contested notions of equity as ‘fairness’ implying the need for redistributive policies to address disadvantage (Savage, Sellar, & Gorur, 2013, p.162) are now absent from the debate. Now, the policy and political discussion is pinpointed on using a rising tide of funding to lift all boats, regardless of school sector.

In the following genealogy, we identify the disruptions, calculations, and accommodations that have served to solidify the funding debates relating to Australian schooling. We propose two key moves that characterise the federal funding of schools in Australia: (1) a move from education for the purpose of collective-wellbeing to promoting individual advancement and (2) education as a tool for economic growth and employment. The latter presents a view that primary and secondary schooling is aimed at continuing to educate elites and reproducing social class, rather than serving all children and acting as a societal spirit-level (the term is from Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). This is to reinvigorate debate on whether the public support of private goods is a good thing for Australia’s civil society or vitiates goals for a just, equitable country.

## Goals of education: From nation-building to individual advancement

Until the mid-1980s, like similar nation-states primary and secondary schooling in Australia was for the collective wellbeing of the nation as well as enacting social justice for its most disadvantaged citizens. After 1987, education became a tool for individual advancement and economic growth. Education policy supported schools as tools for individual advancement by reinforcing individual choice with a dual system of schooling, one private and one public.

At the turn of the 19th century, the provision of schooling was originally the responsibility of churches with ‘the Anglican Church [providing] the first building and finances to educate children’ and ‘Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist congregations… all involved in some form of elementary schooling for the rapidly increasing child population’ (Stewart & Russo, 2001, p.30). Thus in the colony of New South Wales, for example, the first Archdeacon, appointed by the Crown, was responsible for ‘the maintenance of the Church and the education of the Youth in New South Wales’ (Austin, 1977, p.13, citing an 1824 letter from Governor Brisbane to Lord Bathhurst).

Initially, financial support of Catholic schools was supported on the grounds of equity, disadvantage, and the social and economic assimilation of an immigrant population. Because of Australia’s history of welfare—Australia was one of the earliest welfare states, beginning in the late 19th century—provision for its poorest was woven into the fabric of society. To the point, Boyd points out that ‘...the fundamental political basis for public funding of private schools comes not from the elite school sector but from a third important sector: the Catholic schools, most of which are not elite in admissions, fees, or resources’ (1987, p.184). Catholic schools received money from the Commonwealth, but because of the history of Church oversight of schooling and a large, poor, Catholic immigrant population, this funding appeared, nominally at least and until the mid-20th Century, to be about social protection rather than wealth and social class reproduction. The Menzies government (1949-1965) was responsible for solidifying the acceptability of Commonwealth funding of private schooling, including the Catholic sector (McIntyre, 1985).

Likewise, the *Australian Schools Commission*, under the Whitlam Government[[2]](#endnote-2), had primarily a social mission and rested on ‘notions of equality of opportunity, diversity, choice, devolution, and participatory citizenship’ (Marginson, 1997, p.46). One aim of this statutory body was to keep the vested interests of the non-government schools at bay while keeping the interests of Australian society in the forefront. Within the Commission was the Karmel Committee, a group of education experts lead by Peter Karmel ‘a prominent and liberally-minded economist who was greatly helped by a brilliant, sociologically-oriented researcher, Jean Blackburn, who subsequently became one of the leading Commissioners’ (Pusey, 1996, p.281). The Committee ‘connected to the radical egalitarians and progressivist values of the time, such as redistribution and positive discrimination, devolution, self-determination, and equality of respect’ (Marginson, 1997, p.54). The resulting 1974 Karmel Report aimed to equalise education opportunity and outcomes and kept economic goals separate from educational ones. But, the Commission also had to work within the context of the existing funding system. As non-government schools already received private money from the government, the Committee did not proposed entirely cutting funding from private schools, but offered to control it by not allotting public assistance to private schools that were above average. The Report caustically stated:

The Committee values the right of parents to educate their children outside government schools…. It accepts the right of parents to choose schooling above the levels to which the Committee's recommendations are designed to raise government schools and non-government schools which are at present below them; it does not accept their right to public assistance to facilitate this choice (Karmel, 1973, p.12).

The Karmel Report marked a substantial increase in federal funding of schools, and represented a significant new interventionist approach to schooling from the federal government (Lingard, 2000). The Report proposed federal funding for breaking up bureaucracy and ensuring that funding reached the schools that needed it most with, for instance, special grants to disadvantaged schools. In addition, “the ‘needs’-based funding formula, under which a school's recurrent grant was determined by its level of economic resources, made it difficult to oppose support for poor Catholic parish schools” (Marginson, 1997, p.47). As Lingard (2000) has argued, the introduction of recurring grants to private schools was a political decision: “Whitlam utilised the introduction of needs-based funding on non-government schools to ‘solve’ the so-called ‘state-aid’ debate within the Labor party itself, and perhaps within the broader polity” (p.25). Over the course of subsequent reforms, throughout Conservative and Labor governments, the reach of the market into education policy increased dramatically and federal funding of schools is now related to ‘steering’ or ‘action at a distance’ (Kickert, 1995; Miller & Rose, 2008), with long-distance accountability and bureaucratic control as well as economic development.

Indeed, there would come to be a difference between where the School Commission set its sights and the resulting policies. The counter-weight effect of the Schools Commission was that ‘the whole private sector was re-energised by the Karmel settlement, and elevated *vis-à-vis* the government sector’ (Marginson, 1997, p.63).

Policy was able to drift away from what the Commission called for, partly because, unlike the United States, where Thomas Jefferson, Horace Mann, and the Committee of Ten set out the goals of schooling (Jefferson, 1818; Mann, 1848; "Committee of Ten" (Committee on Secondary School Studies), 1892), or France where purposes of education were defined in relation to foundational goals of post-revolutionary nation-building and shaping citizen identity (de Condorcet, 1792), the Australian nation was born modern with no seminal, historical documents stating the purpose of a common school system. In France and the United States, where the government, separate from the Church, is responsible for providing education to its citizens, such historic documents are a yardstick for how far policy and practice have drifted from the original tenets of public education (And indeed at times they have drifted quite far. For a discussion of this, see Dean, 2009, and in particular, p.23). As a consequence, in the absence of such foundational declarations of the societal role of education, policy in the area of federal school funding has been characterised, since 1987 at least, by its ad hoc nature.

In the landmark 1981 DOGS High Court Case, the issue of school funding was mainly framed as the separation of church and state. As Gibbs J put it, ‘church schools are seen by the church as fulfilling a religious as well as a purely educational purpose’ (A.G. (Victoria), 1981, p.161). But by this point, Catholic schools were only receiving a fraction of federal funds relative to the non-Catholic, independent schools. Really, school funding was predominantly an issue of whether education should be for the common purpose of society, or a positional good for the benefit of individuals. The trend is harmonious with the Fraser (1975-1983) and Hawke governments’ (1983-1991) tendency towards economic rationalism. Kenway (1990) notes that what was occurring through the 1980s was a challenge to public schooling—a ‘discourse of derision’—that supported the funding of private schooling on the basis of diversity, the need to have alternatives to a monolithic bureaucracy, and the advocating of parental choice.

In 1987, the purpose of schooling seemed to meet a turning point with formalised education becoming characterised and enacted as a tool for individual advancement and economic development linked to work rather than one for the more broad development of society. Here, the voice of private interests—individual and, echoing neoliberalism’s privileging of the economy, corporate—becomes louder, the voice of experts fades, and the education sector sees educational goals other than economic ones becoming increasingly marginalised. Pusey recounts this turning point, where the Education Department was rolled into a larger department that included employment and training:

…the amalgamation took the education portfolio from Senator Susan Ryan, a member of the ‘Left’ faction of the Party, and put in under the new super-department of Employment, Education, and Training under the then minister Richard Dawkins (an economics graduate), together with all the ‘responsibility for labour market programs.’ In this regard, it is perhaps equally significant that the other half, the employment and training function, was taken from Minister Ralph Willis, who is a neo-Keynesian (1996, p.147)

Through John Howard’s economic rationalist oversight of Treasury (1977-1983) and Malcom Fraser’s liberal Prime Ministership (1975-1983), Australian society became more socio-economically polarised, with an eroded middle class and growing class divisions (Pusey, 1996). And so, with federal funding support and a growing population of Australians who were trying to ‘get ahead of the Joneses’ and to enter the middle classes, the independent schools blossomed, offering a leg up from common public schooling and expanding their client base. In the case of Australian school funding, there are politically powerful interest groups connected to the independent schools, both due to the congruence of the political sector with members of school governance boards in the elite schools[[3]](#endnote-3), and because many low-fee, independent schools[[4]](#endnote-4) sit in marginal and swinging seats where parents’ votes can significantly shift the outcome of elections. Since the mid-20th century this group has become the one benefiting from federal funding of non-government schools. School funding has been framed as a technical issue of ‘how much’ instead of a political issue of ‘whether.’ The independent schools’ interests were bolstered by an informal political alliance with the Catholic schools in which the former benefitted from their private status association with the latter’s social justice credentials and agenda (Marginson, 1997, p.50).

## Funding and the shifting goals of education

More recently, policies no longer place social goals at the forefront of education, but speak directly to the economic goals of education. Thus, a ministerial statement on the 2008-2009 Education Revolution opens with ‘Australia faces significant challenges in improving the productivity and participation of our working population’ (Australian Government, 2009). Likewise, the first paragraph of a 2013 brochure for the Better Schools: National Plan for School Improvement explains: ‘A great education is the key to unlocking individual potential. It helps our economy grow and helps our country remain prosperous and secure’ (Australian Government, 2013). These economic thematisations are in stark contrast to the Karmel Report’s emphasis on social justice.

In his 1955 report for the Australian Council on Education Research (ACER), Butts, an American Fulbright Scholar in Australia, explained that Australia’s dual system of education perpetuates inequalities and social divides: ‘But in so far as a dual system of schools helps to create and perpetuate class, religious or economic divisions in society, in so far as the separation of children serves mainly to establish and maintain feelings of superiority and inferiority, and in so far as the competition among schools is primarily directed towards the passing of external examination and gaining academic awards, I believe the dual system carries definite signs of danger’ (1955, p.25). It is important to note that Butts wrote this in 1955, long before the 1973 Karmel Report or the DOGS case fixed the debate as one of quantity of monies for non-government schools. Butts does not define the problem as an issue of school funding, but as one of the purpose of the ‘common school’ for the commons, or society. In fact, Butts has framed the problem as it is for society as a whole—recognising the precariousness of this idea of a coherent entity called ‘society’—rather than as it appears for factional private interests within society. This warning has been heard again, with scholars explicitly warning that the Australian school system, with its elite private schools and residualised public ones has become a tool for social class reproduction: The elite schools which, although comprising a relatively small fraction of the private sector, loom large in social importance and in the public image… an elite school is one that recruits from the elite sector of society and helps reproduce it’ (Anderson, 1992, p.218). The is a growing sector of low-fee private schools attract a different student body from the elite schools. As Kenway notes, however, pointing to these schools as an argument for how the private sector educates disadvantaged students is to disregard the distribution of students by SES across independent schools: ‘Disadvantaged students are not evenly spread across the independent sector and are concentrated in very small pockets’ (p.294)**.** Indeed, a look at data disaggregated by Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage shows that ‘while the independent sector generally outperforms the government sector, this is largely a feature of the background of the students attending independent schools, and *does not necessarily reflect higher quality in or* *performance by the independent schools themselves’* (NOUS Group, 2011, p.26)*.*

There has been a shift in emphasis in Australian education over the past 150 years, with primary and secondary schooling increasingly being seen as a positional good, as distinct from other broader purposes of education (democratic citizenry, nation-building, collective wellbeing). A positional good is one that is ‘(1) scarce in some absolute or imposed sense or (2) subject to congestion or crowding through more extensive use’ (Hirsch, 1977, p.27). In the context of education, a positional good is ‘one which gains much of its value from whether you have more than other people—and it is not just about acquiring skills in some absolute way’ (Wolf, 2002, p.251). This point has been made before about Australian education. For example, Davidson, writing for The Age since the 1980s, has explained that because “education has become what economists call a ‘positional good’, in which access to quality education, and therefore life chances, is determined by income” (2012) ‘the middle class will cease to be represented in Australia’s [state] secondary schools except in front of the blackboard’(1984) and that ‘beyond a certain point, the transfer of middle-class students from government to non-government schools impoverishes the students who remain in the public system’ (2013). Furthermore, this two-tiered system of education, one for the elites and one for the masses, is damaging to civil society. Here again, Butts foreshadowed this by asking ‘whether the dual school systems are eating away at the foundations of democracy or whether they are building sturdily upon them and strengthening them’ (1955, p.26).

Such issues remain invisible to some government actors and policy makers who espouse the ‘sector-blind’ line of thinking. Indeed, we would suggest that one of the consequences of being ‘sector-blind’ with our government funding is that education, a domain that we have argued is inherently political, becomes *de*politicised with significant consequences both for individuals and groups, and for society as a whole, which we explore in greater depth below.

# Depoliticisation and being sector-blind/ colour blind

The debate around the issue of government funding of non-government schools has been depoliticised with the *status quo* now viewed as an *a priori* reality from which we cannot escape. We can see this reification of the status quo in the epigraph. Ex-Minister Garrett’s strategy is to label those who oppose his position in pejorative terms as ‘divisive,’ in contrast to his inclusive position[[5]](#endnote-5) that claims to serve and represent ‘every’ school and ‘every’ student. A useful way to think about what is going on here is by deploying the thinking tools of Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) political logics of equivalence and difference. Within these logics, the field of discursivity—the potential pool of statements capable of representing social reality—is open and infinite. Against the background of this potentially infinite realm of possibility, discourses attempt to impose closure by temporarily fixing the relationships among discursive moments. The political logics of equivalence and difference represent two ways such closure can be operationalised. In the case of the logic of equivalence, the field of discursivity is simplified by being rendered into two opposing ‘chains of equivalence.’ Within each chain, differences between terms are elided, so as to accentuate the opposition between members of the discursive chain and those of the opposing chain. By contrast, the logic of difference works to prevent the formation of such chains of equivalence by emphasising the distinctiveness of individual elements (signifiers), thus positing a realm in which all elements are equal in their difference. With this theorisation, we can see that Garrett’s strategy is to employ the logic of difference to argue that catering to the needs of every school and every child requires being ‘sector-blind,’ manifested in the rejection of any (‘divisive’) oppositional chains of equivalence between public versus private. The point, of course, is that both political logics—that deployed by Garrett and that he attributes to his opponents—are simplifications and are inadequate if we wish to seriously engage with the complexities of social and political reality.

What this sector-blindness constitutes is the non-affluent, ‘aspirational,’ low-fee, private and Catholic school parents who can swing the vote from Labor to Liberal, have ‘chosen’ freedom over common unity. Indeed, the freedom to choose the kinds of schools that *I* want for *my child* and that will increase my child’s chances to *get ahead of other children* has been given far greater political weight than the idea of a school system for the purpose of equalising society, supporting democracy, and nourishing civil society. Similarly, the epigraph asserts that the central problem of Australian education is that (1) disadvantage is an impediment to achievement, and (2) choice is concretised as policy that needs extending in order to remove this impediment, as if choice is outside of the political determination of inequities. For example, one of the recommendations of the Gonski Review states: ‘Funding should support a diverse range of school provision and allow choice by parents alongside their responsibility (in most cases) to make a more substantial private contribution when electing to enrol a child in a non-government school’ (2012, p.149). A further example, is the Education Minister’s determination that the Gonski Review would propose solutions to Australian education, in relation to equity and disadvantage, but in these recommendations one constant should remain: ‘no school would lose a dollar per student.’ We can see how this politically determined axiom frames the problem and solution in this excerpt from the Gonski Review:

On the basis of the Australian Government’s announcement that under a new funding arrangement no school would lose a dollar per student as a result of this review, the panel has recommended that a minimum public contribution per student for every non-government school be applied, set at between 20 and 25 per cent of the schooling resource standard excluding loadings (2012, p.xviii).

Despite its disavowal of politics and ideology and its attempt to claim a degree of political neutrality, the ‘sector-blind’ position adopted by the Federal Labor government is deeply political in its support for the *status quo* and its refusal to seriously address issues of inequity and inequality. One way in which sector blindness is constituted is in the seductive notion that education policy is an undertaking that provides technical (resourcing, organisational, etc.) solutions to adaptive symptoms that might instead require changes in values and beliefs. To disrupt this elision of policy with what is often posited as neutrality, we must see that policy *is* the frame of the problem that is to be solved (Bacchi, 2000; Kingdon, 2003). Indeed, as Connell posits, despite a litany of research about the problems of contemporary education, that “all of this work counts for nothing in major educational policy making. This is because, contrary to the rhetoric of ‘evidence-based policy’, neo-liberal policy-making proceeds as if it *already knows the answer* to policy problems” (Connell, 2013, p.284). The result is that the problem is defined and the solution proposed in a way that is palatable as a feasible set of implementable solutions. As Miller and Rose suggest,

from the perspective of government, it is pointless to identify a problem unless one simultaneously set[s] out some measures to rectify it. The solidity and separateness of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions’ are thus attenuated. Or, to put it differently, the activity of problematising is intrinsically linked to devising ways to seek to remedy it. So, if a particular diagnosis or tool appears to fit a particular ‘problem,’ this is because they have been made so they fit each other (Miller & Rose, 2008, p.15).

For example, we can see that funding is mainly a problem of privilege, despite the ways it always appears to be the public schooling sector’s problem, criticised, for example, for being overstretched in capacity, declining educational standards or lacking adequate and enforced discipline of students. In other words, an absent presence (Derrida, 1976) of school funding debates is that funding is a private schooling sector problem and exists, in large part, because of the presence of non-government schools.

## Sector-blind/ colour-blind

In addition to sector-blindness, we posit that much of the policy and political discussion, and to a great extent the critiques of this, including the papers in the special issue, have framed equity as colour-blind. Gillborn defines ‘colour-blindness’ as ‘an obstinate refusal to consider ethnic diversity despite a wealth of evidence that minorities are *not* sharing equally’ (Gillborn, 2008). If we look at the Gonski Review, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic’ is noted twice. The first reference is in relation to equity and the contention that ability is not distributed according to ethnicity. The second time is in reference to the category *Language Background Other Than English* (p.118). This category is troublesome because it occludes any reference to ethnicity*.* Sectoral inequality is in fact related to the ways in which some private and public schools are racialised and demonised, and our discussions of disadvantage—as the touchstone of funding—cannot be undertaken in any sense of fidelity, absent these discussions of race and difference. Indigeneity is used as the key marker of difference and disadvantage in the Gonski report, with “Indigenous” or “Indigeneity” mentioned 27 times in the first 64 pages. And yet it stands alone with no reference to racism: indigeneity tends to be noted as if it has causal power in explaining disadvantage.

In reference to discussions of funding in Australia, while ideas of ethnicity and Indigeneity are included in the Gonski Review they tend to be aggregated as part of the Indices of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, rather than dealt with as part of a nuanced discussion of ethnicity, Indigeneity, race, and whiteness in Australian education (Gulson, 2011; Vass, 2012). This framing of the problem as an index is evident in the focus on equity in the Gonski Review, and the public discourses about the subsequent *Better Schools Plan*: disregarding that students from different ethnicities are disproportionately overrepresented in the government sector, underrepresented in the private sector, and segregated and racialised when conflated with different schools. We might, furthermore, see that there is a wilful sector blindness and colour blindness that elides the kinds of differences that are both necessary and valorised to make private schooling viable as a recipient of state aid (to recuperate a dormant term). Within private and public schooling there is a segmentation, segregation and separation that depends on the ways in which schooling is not merely the purview of ameliorating racism, but is implicated in the production of new forms of racism (Gillborn, 2008; Gulson, 2011; Leonardo, 2009).

# Coda: Debate Redux

It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism(Fisher, 2009, p.2).

…one of the most important things that intellectual workers concerned with education can now do, is to build is alternative spaces – spaces in which critiques is possible, practitioner knowledge can find expression and other trajectories for education are proposed (Connell, 2013, p.285).

This final section takes up Connell’s challenge, and proposes an alternative trajectory for educational policy debates and initiatives through a reinvigoration of the notion of debate and *dissensus*. We suggest our analysis in this paper engages us in rethinking and reengaging with the idea that education is always already political and to recognise the depoliticisation of education, as it becomes increasingly conceived in technical terms and reduced to individual and economic concerns. This does not mean that teachers and students need to align themselves with or against particular positions represented by party politics. It does mean recognising that education is a political endeavour and that educational possibilities are constrained by policies, themselves reflective of wider social, historical and economic discourses and practices that prioritise particular interests. Moreover, it means acknowledging that education involves choices about which and whose knowledge is to count, about how society’s resources are allocated and distributed, and about managing tensions between requirements to sort and classify students, and aspirations to enable all students to achieve ‘success.’

Yet despite the inescapably political nature of education, all around us, in ‘the emaciated state of the politics of education’ (Fielding & Moss, 2010, p.170), we see evidence of its *de*politicisation. Brown explains that ‘depoliticisation involves construing inequality, subordination, marginalisation and social conflict, which all require political analysis and political solutions, as personal and individual, on the one hand, or as natural, religious, or cultural on the other’ and viewing a particular phenomenon outside the conditions of its historical emergence and the power relations that produced it (2009, p.15) (p.15). The *origins* of such elisions of history and power typically lie not in a deliberate conspiracy of silence but ‘issue from a certain blindness about power and dominance that is the privilege of the powerful’ (p.212, N.13). The *consequence* of such elisions is thus a construal of the status quo as somehow the natural and inevitable order of things.

In his book, *Capitalist realism*, Fisher describes the ‘pervasive sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility’(2009, p.7) characterising contemporary times. In thinking about overcoming this political ennui, he highlights the point, articulated by radical theorists from Brecht to Badiou, that ‘emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order’, must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency’ (2009, p.17). The notion of school ‘choice’ in education has achieved this sort of hegemonic status as ‘the appearance of a ‘natural order.’ As we have seen, this strategy of naturalising choice is one that is also adopted by Australian politicians, as the following comment from then Federal Minister of Education, Garrett exemplifies:

I think the most important thing about the way in which we've approached this school education reform is to recognise we have a diverse school system. It is one where parents are making choices about where to send their kids to school and it's one which, over time, has changed in character (Armitage & Hurst, 2013).

In order to facilitate these choices, the Federal Labor government has sought to provide improved informational resources through its twin policy technologies of standardised high-stakes testing (NAPLAN) and through providing online data concerning achievement, demographics and funding (MySchool website), thereby consolidating all parents as market players (Gorur, 2013) rather than grapple seriously with issues of unequal access to commodities and capabilities (Sen, 1999). This technocratic policy response reflects the shift in recent decades from the social contract of the welfare state to that of the neoliberal political order, in which ‘the broad overarching social contract to which governments should be held accountable is to providing conditions conducive to the development of efficient, well-functioning markets’ (Rawolle, 2013, p.242).

Instead of denying privilege and evading the politics of education by advancing notions such as ‘sector-blindness,’ governments and stakeholder in education must begin from an acknowledgement of the shift in Australia’s social contract over the past four decades. For just as imagining alternatives to capitalism requires recognition of capitalism’s differential impacts and affordances, so education reform, done differently, in Australia demands recognition of how school funding arrangements serve as a means of entrenching historical, existing and emerging forms of advantage as a starting point. In Rancièrean terms, this means engaging in the real politics of dissensus and disagreement (Rancière, 1999; Rancière & Corcoran, 2010) rather than the *faux* politics of consensus that merely serves to preserve the contemporary ‘police’ order. In practical terms this means revisiting the debate over the public funding of non-public schools without fear of being labelled a ‘class warrior.’ It also means recognising how racialised and gendered forms of advantage and disadvantage are inseparable from, but not reducible to, issues of school funding. It also means thinking deeply about the fundamental purposes of education in Australian democratic society and articulating a foundational educational constitution that can serve as a benchmark against which new policy developments can be evaluated.

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**Genealogy of Public Support of Private Schools in Australia** (table adapted from Pusey, 1991)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Elections, Major Announcements and Events** | **Public Schools** | **Independent and Catholic Schools** | **Budgets, Tax, and Monetary Policy** | **Unions** |
| 1879 | Joint pastoral letter states Catholic children must attend a Catholic school |  |  |  |  |
| 1942 |  |  |  | In High Court case, Federal Government wins the right over the States to charge income tax |  |
| 1951 |  |  |  | Financial assistance to denominational colleges at universities |  |
| 1952 |  |  |  | Menzies introduces tax deduction for school fees |  |
| 1954 |  |  |  | Tax deduction for school building fees take effect |  |
| 1955 | ACER and Butts publish the report *Assumptions Underlying Australian Education*, questioning whether government funding of private schools is beneficial to Australian society |  |  |  |  |
| 1956 |  |  | Federal government pays private school building fees in ACT |  |  |
| 1962 |  |  | Catholic schools close all Goulburn, ACT schools, placing strain on local public school system |  |  |
| 1964 | Federal government provides support for science labs in public and private schools |  |  |  |  |
| 1968 | Grants for school libraries |  |  |  |  |
| 1969 |  |  |  | Recurring grants for private schools introduced |  |
| 1972 | Labor party secures Catholic vote in election by supporting state aid for religious schools and supporting all schools on a “need” basis (general capital grants) |  |  |  |  |
| 1973 | Australian Schools Commission and Karmel |  |  |  | Support for Karmel Report from unions |
| 1975 | Whitlam is dismissed by then-Governor General Kerr and Fraser is nominated PM. |  |  | Whitlam budget is blocked in Senate by Fraser-led Liberal coalition |  |
| 1976 |  |  |  | Reduction of funding need categories from 8 to 6 for non-government schools |  |
|  |  |  | CSC Report: Some Aspects of School Finance in Australia |  |  |
| 1981 | High Court ruling in DOGS case allows for broad interpretation of Section 96 of Constitution, allowing Commonwealth to provide assistance to non-government schools. | Commonwealth Schools Commission file a minority report dissenting from the Catholic Schools Commission’s recommendations on school funding |  |  |  |
| 1982 |  |  |  | Reduction of funding need categories from 6 to 3 for non-government schools |  |
| 1983 |  |  | CSC commissions four study discussion papers on Target Recurrent Resource Standards |  |  |
| 1984 |  |  | CSC Report: Funding Policies for Australian Schools |  |  |
| 1985 |  |  |  | Quadrennial Community Standard funding of government and non-government schools implemented (“basket of resources”) |  |
| 1987 | Education Department is amalgamated into the Department of Education, Employment, and Training |  |  |  |  |
| 1996 |  |  |  | Increase in private school subsidies and waiting period for establishing new school is abolished |  |
| 2001 |  |  | SES-based funding scheme introduced for all independent schools |  |  |
| 2005 |  |  | SES-based funding scheme applied to all Catholic schools |  |  |
| 2012 | Gonski Review |  |  |  |  |
| 2013 |  |  |  | National Plan for School Improvement | AEU supports NPSI |

1. **Notes:**

   Government academic selective schools are little referenced but have a significant role contributing to residualising the non-selective government schools sector (Bonnor & Caro, 2007, Kenway, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Whitlam government ruled from 1972 to 1975 and succeeded a long period of Conservative government, in power since 1949. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In the 2004 election, the Prime Ministerial aspirant Mark Latham was pilloried in part for identifying a hit-list’ of elite private schools that received large amounts of public money. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is the growing sector of Australian schooling (Buckingham, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. It is worth noting Garrett’s adoption of the time-honored strategy of conservatives to label those who wished to change the status quo as ‘ideological,’ as if one’s own position was somehow exempt from ideology. Such purportedly ‘non-ideological’ decrials of others’ ‘ideology’ are testimony to the way ideologies seek to naturalise the current state of affairs as normal by depicting them as ‘just the way things are.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-5)