

Conclusion

In this all too brief inquiry, the committee has grappled with issues that warrant far more comprehensive examination and reflection. The introduction of a new quadrennial schools funding bill is one opportunity open to the Parliament to look at the appropriations in a wider context of schools policy. The Government's policy since 1996 has been to encourage the establishment and expansion of private schools through mechanisms that also reduce the share of Commonwealth funding going to public schools. Whether intentional or not, the effect has been to destabilise public schools by eroding public confidence in them and diminishing the expectation that they can provide a good education.

The SES model is the chosen instrument for the maximising of benefits for students in private schools. The continuation of the SES funding model means that encouragement of private school development will continue, regardless of its effects on the operations of the public schools and the continued and harmful segmentation of the school sector. This will continue to widen the gap between the opportunities available to the economically advantaged, and those in disadvantaged circumstances. Social mobility is affected by a class-based school system. The failure to fully harness the potential of youthful human resources that are diminishing as a proportion of an aging population, will contribute further to a decline in standards of living and productivity of the national workforce.

The committee emphasises that, in the course of the inquiry, it heard comprehensive evidence that the Commonwealth's school funding arrangements and policies were flawed. Witnesses and submissions also expressed the view that public schools were urgently in need of renewed support, including financial support. While there was no unanimity as to what the problems and shortcomings were, there was near universal dissatisfaction with the current situation. This emanated from representatives both of private and public schools as well as from academic experts. In the light of such overwhelming expressions of concern, the committee believes that there are grounds for major revision of the current funding regime.

Opposition members of the committee have particularly strong views on Commonwealth assistance to schools because they have seen the Commonwealth misuse its powers to provide national leadership. Both sides of politics have recognised the need to use the fiscal power of the Commonwealth to direct schools policy. Coalition governments at the Commonwealth level have shown little interest in promoting the interests of state public education systems, even though states are at times unable to fund their schools at a satisfactory level. The failure of the Coalition's school funding policy is evidenced by the collapse of a national consensus which began with Karmel in 1973 and survived until the first term of the Howard Government.

While MCEETYA in theory accords a prominent voice and considerable influence to the states, in formulating national policy on schooling, this Government has acted to

override its role and ignore its processes. The Australian Constitution places responsibility for education unequivocally in the hands of the states. The constitutional reality of Commonwealth fiscal ascendancy, however, means that the states have been unable to resist the imposition of the Commonwealth's bad policy despite their operational control over their own school systems and their powers to register private schools. The committee notes the impatience expressed in submissions from state Catholic education commissions about the confusing nature of Commonwealth-state funding arrangements under the current Government. The committee believes that this matter should be properly addressed through a process of consensus between the Commonwealth and the states.

A new consensus, in the spirit of the Karmel settlement, is sorely and urgently needed. The committee hopes to see open community discussion about the shape of such a new compact. All parties to a renewed national consensus should be invited to sit down and exchange views in an honest attempt to achieve once again what has been lost as a result of the division created by the Commonwealth over the last eight years. The fact that, after a lengthy period of intense antagonism about the issues, such a consensus prevailed for over twenty years indicates that it is possible to retrieve community harmony. It is not fitting that the Australian community should be bitterly divided over a matter of such concern to all – the education of the young.

As the evidence to the inquiry indicates, the issue of freedom of choice leads the arguments proffered in favour of the entitlement of the most richly endowed schools to generous financial assistance. The committee majority makes the point again that choice is the luxury of those who can afford to pay. Even then a choice may be limited by the prerogative of a school to choose its students, as may be the case in the selection of students with high academic ability or sporting prowess. Freedom of choice in schooling must be limited by the obligation that falls on governments to ensure that resources are directed to raising the quality of the most disadvantaged schools. In doing so, and in the event that there is an improvement of educational quality in those schools, the choice of school options is greatly increased. As noted previously, the Australian school system is highly stratified by first world standards, a factor which increases the enrolment pressure on non-government schools. The committee reiterates its confidence in Australia's public schools systems as providers of high-quality education and of equality of opportunity for all. Taking current Commonwealth Government policy to its logical conclusion, however, would allow public schools to decline to the point of marginalisation. Although there are notable exceptions, non-government schools have already shown themselves unwilling to enrol students from among more marginalised and disadvantaged families. Public schools could be reduced to the role of public welfare agencies.

The committee majority argues, therefore, that because underperforming schools reinforce underachievement and social dysfunction, the optimum social and economic benefit comes from maximising expenditure on these schools. Schools which derive most of their income from fees and endowments will continue to thrive, just as they did when, without complaint, they were without any Commonwealth assistance. The

most significant result will be that increased opportunities will be extended among those of average income and below.

As choice is increasingly seen as the prerogative of schools as much as of parents, the committee majority believes that action is long overdue to oblige non-government schools to recognise their community service obligations. Public schools should not carry alone the burden of being schools of last resort: the place of refuge or incarceration for the non-conforming and the rejected students from non-government schools. The enforcement of this regulation may well be a state responsibility, but it is one where the Commonwealth should be taking a policy lead.

Private schools should also, as a condition of receipt of Commonwealth funding, be prepared to report fully and publicly not only on their use of government funds but on their financial situation and income, including income from fees. This will ensure the transparency and accountability now lacking in the Commonwealth's approach to funding non-government schools. Only in this knowledge can a Commonwealth Government ensure that its own funding allocations to schools reflect the actual needs of schools and their students.

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Senator Trish Crossin

