

“The lessons of Goulburn resonate in schools 50 years later”

by Gerard Henderson, Political Opinion, The Sydney Morning Herald, 21 August 2012



Standing up to the unions ... Julia Gillard. *Photo: Andrew Meares*

It's just gone 50 years since what is now called the Goulburn Schools Strike. On Friday July 13, 1962, six Catholic schools in the Goulburn diocese closed and instructed their pupils to enrol the following Monday in the government school system. Some 2000 Catholic pupils applied for entry into the public school system, which had only 640 vacancies.

The immediate cause of the protest was the refusal of NSW health authorities to install additional toilet facilities at Our Lady of Mercy Preparatory School in Goulburn. It was driven by members of the Catholic laity who were frustrated that they received no government support for the funding of the Catholic school system, which had been formed at the end of the 19th century.

The story of the Goulburn School Strike is documented in Michael Hogan's book *The Catholic Campaign for State Aid* (1978) and in the Commonwealth Education Department's publication entitled *A History of State Aid* (2006). The incident attracted widescale national media attention. Yet it was not successful, and within a couple of weeks, the Catholic school children returned to their original schools.

In her speech to the Independent Schools National Forum yesterday, the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, referred to that "first, famous Menzies science laboratories program which gave so many independent schools a historic boost". Correct. The reference was to the decision of Robert Menzies's Coalition government, on the eve of the 1963 federal election, to commit the Commonwealth to provide financial aid for the establishment of science blocks in both government and non-government schools.

This did not happen by chance. The Menzies government had achieved only a narrow victory in the 1961 election. It was saved by a strong first preference flow from the Democratic Labor Party, which had been formed as a consequence of the Labor Split of the mid-1950s. B.A. Santamaria (the president of the Catholic lay organisation the National Civic Council) and others convinced the Coalition of the need to make a gesture to the largely Catholic DLP voters.

The tactic worked in 1963. So much so that it was tried again four years later. In 1967, the Victorian Liberal Party premier Henry Bolte was worried that he might lose seats to the Country Party. This time Santamaria, working with the DLP, sent a message to Bolte that the DLP could well preference the Country Party ahead of the Liberals if the Liberals did not make a gesture to DLP supporters.

Bolte got the message. In 1967 the Liberal Party announced that, if re-elected, it would provide a form of per capita payments to children attending non-government primary schools. By the end of the 1960s, the principle of government assistance to non-government schools and students had been firmly established. Soon after, Labor, which had long opposed assisting non-government schools, came on board.

From time to time, sections of the left have tried to change the policy. Before she became Labor premier of Victoria, Joan Kirner was active in the Defence of Government Schools (DOGS) organisation – which was really an attack dog aimed at non-government schools.

Appearing on Jonathan Green's *Sunday Extra* on Radio National last weekend, Ben Eltham declared that the \$6.5 billion annually needed to fund the Gonski Report "would easily be found if private schools, the elite private schools in particular, were not receiving any funding at all".

Apparently Eltham is unaware of the message of Goulburn half a century ago. If government funding to non-government schools ceased or was significantly reduced, there would be a movement of students from the private to the public sector. This would amount to a significant cost to the Commonwealth and state budgets.

Then there is the politics. Many families in the suburbs and regional centres – where most of the marginal seats are located – want their children to attend moderate-fee, non-government schools. Mainstream Labor understands this, even if many inner-city leftists do not.

The hostility of the education unions to private schools turns on the fact that some non-government schools challenge the public sector model. Quite a few private schools have larger class sizes than their public school counterparts. Moreover, all give principals the right to hire and fire teachers and to terminate poor performers. The teachers unions, on the other hand, frequently defend the incompetent and the lazy among their members.

In the United States, Britain and now Western Australia, governments are establishing "charter" or "free" schools, which are publicly funded but operate independently from the education bureaucracy. The Coalition, led by Christopher Pyne on this issue, is beginning to embrace this initiative.

Prime Minister Gillard has performed well in standing up to the education unions and introducing such initiatives as the My School website. Her support for independent schools is in this tradition.

The real test, however, will turn on funding. Her speech yesterday did not resolve this issue.

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