

Launch of Dr Graeme Starr's ***Variety and Choice – Good Schools for all Australians*** by Barry O'Farrell MP, NSW Leader of the Opposition,
Wednesday 27 January 2010

Dr Graeme Starr's *Variety and Choice – Good Schools for all Australians* is a comprehensive, scholarly and welcome addition to the list of publications of the Menzies Research Centre.

In just 120 pages, this book provides a historical outline of the development of non-government schools in Australia from 1788 until the present day, explains the start and ensuing development of the state aid debate and, along the way, details the characters – religious and political, villains and heroes – who were involved.

For those interested in 'the sublime art of politics' there is much to keep our interest in these pages including the actions, manoeuvrings and lessons to be learned from the central figures of the state aid debates:

- the interests groups ranging from the colonial Orangemen, the Catholic Federation, the Council of Defence of Government Schools (DOGs) to the Australian Parents Council and Australian Education Union;
- the politicians from John Dunmore Lang and Henry Parkes through Menzies, Askin, Calwell and Whitlam to Fraser, Hawke, Howard and Rudd;
- the priests like Archbishops Polding, Vaughan and O'Brien who fought for the principle involved, Goulburn's Bishop Cullinane who demonstrated the illogical consequences of the anti state aid policy and those, like Cardinal Moran and Archbishop Carroll, who were accused of allowing partisan politics to unduly influence the pursuit of principle.

Speaking of Archbishop Carroll, when I heard a northern beaches launch was being planned for this book I wondered if it would be at St Augustines, Brookvale, where just three weeks before the 1972 Federal Election – and at something as simple as a library opening – the Archbishop made his famous intervention supporting the ALP.

So whatever your perspective or interests – be it in policy, politics or history – this is the book for you: informative, interesting and bound to be influential. It's a credit to both the author and his publisher.

Graeme Starr is a respected political scientist who brings both practical and academic perspectives to his work.

Like others present, I'm particularly grateful that Graeme has taken on a task so many of us have been keenly waiting for: a biography of John Carrick.

Sir John is one of the party's 'national treasures' – a Gandalf the Gray of the Liberal Party of Australia. Friend and adviser of Menzies, shrewd and strategic party administrator and skilful and successful senior minister in the Fraser Government, John Carrick's abiding interest in education continue undiminished today.

Once again Tom Harley and Julian Leeser have demonstrated the Menzies Research Centre's superb timing with the release of this book. Just as with previous publications, it arrives at a time when the issues canvassed are again the subject of discussion and debate.

Only ten days ago, courtesy of the Australian Education Union, we awoke to headlines decrying the level of federal funding to non-government schools. In support of the claims being made, the arguments detailed in Dr Starr's treatise were again being aired.

It was a reminder of both the continuing interest and passion the issue evokes and the fact that, for some, the state aid debate is far from settled.

It was a reminder too of the distortions that have always been part of the debate.

Once again the focus was on federal funding – ignoring the role of the states in financing government schools. It compared the Federal Government's provision of aid to government schools with the assistance it gives to non-government schools.

It ignored the 'federalism' realities that government schools receiving 90% of their funds from state governments and 10% from the federal government. For non-government schools the figures are 15% state and 43% federal – with parents and other sources making up the remainder.

The only novelty in this latest debate was the sight and sound of Deputy Prime Minister Gillard having to explain these 'federalism' realities – only a few short years after she refused to accept the facts.

For Liberals the state aid debate – and this book that details its historical twists and turns – is important because it involves matters central to our political belief system: freedom, choice, individuals and the role of government.

As a Liberal I have a clear view of the role of government.

For me the goal is to create an environment in which individuals can strive and thrive.

An environment where individuals can realise their potential both for their own benefit and that of the wider community – where securing economic growth is not an end in itself but a means to unlocking opportunities for individuals to fulfil the potential we Liberals know they possess.

It's about building an inclusive and fair society where opportunity and choice abounds, where initiative and responsibility are encouraged and where individual freedom is safeguarded by institutions of government that people can trust.

And it's about the effective marshalling of government resources to provide the essential public services upon which people can rely with confidence to achieve their dreams and goals.

And in all of this the development of the individual – education – is fundamental.

So I'm unsurprised that Robert Menzies – someone who exemplified the benefits of education – adopted the position he did on state aid.

Menzies, the scholarship boy, who started his education at the tiny Jeparit State School before heading to Grenville College, Ballarat, and Wesley College, Melbourne. Whose scholarship took him to the top of two professions: the law and politics.

As Dr Starr makes clear Menzies was concerned about the impact of uniformity on education attracted to Montesquieu's observation that "...the idea of uniformity appealed to little minds who found in it a species of perfection".

Menzies never claimed to be perfect. In his writings and speeches, before, during and after his prime ministership, he generally presented himself as practical and pragmatic.

As this book confirms, Menzies had a 'practical federalist conviction about education, but no dogmatic attachment to states' rights'. Menzies was content to take the lead in education when it was in the national interest and promoted the values of equity, diversity and choice.

In this, as in other areas, Menzies was pragmatic in the proper sense of the word. He refused to be constrained by 'abstract theory or ideology', preferring instead to apply measures that would best produce a beneficial and practical outcome, understanding that upon all government decisions rested 'the wellbeing or happiness or security' of individual citizens.

But, in my view, the importance Menzies placed upon education and his actions in state aid and other areas of education was influenced by at least one other factor.

We are all shaped by our experiences and the times in which we live.

So too was Menzies who lived through two World Wars and the Great Depression before his election as Australia's Liberal Prime Minister.

Reading about his activities involving state aid again confirmed my belief that Menzies' decisions in government were inextricably linked to the hopes and dreams that he and the WW2 generation (including a young John Carrick) had for a post war Australia.

It's evident in a lesser-known passages in one of the radio broadcasts Menzies made from this city in 1942. Those talks subsequently published in book form entitled "The Forgotten People".

In his 13 November broadcast Menzies said:

"...we achieve the good of man when we help and encourage him to be a man – strong, self-reliant, intelligent, independent, sympathetic and generous ... This means that in the new world we must seek to develop all the intelligence and strength and character in every child. Each one of them must have his chance. We must spend more on education; ... Lack of money must be no impediment to bright minds ... To develop every human being to his fullest capacity for thought, for action, for sacrifice and for endurance is our major task; and no prejudice, stupidity, selfishness or vested interest must stand in the way."

Menzies background made it clear to him that education was the key to achieving those outcomes – whether overcoming prejudice, realising one's potential or building and progressing the nation

For a man of such views seeking to guarantee the right of every child to public support for their education regardless of their choice of school was a no brainer, fitting both his party's and personal philosophy.

Menzies saw support of those attending non-government schools as another example of what I term "the beneficial view of government" – how, through a decision or policy, government can provide encouragement for individuals to seize opportunity and fulfil their potential.

And thankfully the path he pioneered has been followed by subsequent Federal and State Liberal Governments and is detailed in this book.

Here in NSW, Askin's actions, influenced by Ralph Honner, the Country Party and, undoubtedly, John Carrick are described.

So too, following the 1988 election, the Greiner Government's decisions to legislate the principles of choice and diversity and establish a formula to guarantee to students attending non-government schools a per capita grant equivalent to 25% of the average cost of educating a child in a government school.

It's the same road the NSW Liberals & Nationals are travelling today.

The principles upon which Menzies and other Liberals based their actions are timeless in their application, whether in relation to the role of government, the importance of the individual, the drivers of opportunity or the significance of education.

It was evident last week when we released our Literacy and Numeracy Action Plan, committing ourselves to providing intensive one-on-one teaching assistance to students failing – or in danger of failing – to meet reading, writing and maths standards regardless of whether they attend a government or non-government school.

We fully accept the state's duty to educate all children. We support parents' right to make a choice of school for their children. And we acknowledge this involves the provision of funds when that choice is for a child to attend a non-government school.

None of this means any lessening of our commitment to public education. On the contrary parents can't have a real choice if they believe they don't have any real alternative.

In accepting our obligation to provide quality education to all students, the NSW Liberals & Nationals are determined to ensure that government education in this State can be a first choice option for parents.

The community's embrace of choice and diversity in schooling is easily demonstrated.

According to the last Census, across NSW 31% of primary students and 39% of secondary students attend non-government schools – results that mirror national figures.

In some areas the figures exceed the State average.

In Drummoyne where almost half (47%) of primary school students and two thirds (64%) of high school students attend non-government schools. While here in Pittwater the figures are 29% and 51% respectively.

These figures provide validation – if such validation is still required – of the correctness of the position taken by Federal and State Liberals to introduce state aid.

But it's also provided by the actions of parents who work hard to pay the fees that are the price of choosing to send children to non-government schools and reinforced by those parents who support and make use of both systems.

All of which simply confirms again the preference of the community for policies that are practical and focussed on improving their lives and their disdain for ideologues and theorists.

This book tells the story of the efforts of ordinary Australians – parents who wanted their children to attend the school of their choice – who successfully fought for the right to have that choice supported by government through the return of some of their taxes to help educate their sons and daughters.

Of parents and politicians who understood the principles involved, recognised the injustice and needs. But above all it's a book that again confirms the recognition of the importance of education to the development and progress of the individual and nation.

It's an important book for Liberals and non-Liberals alike and I am pleased to officially launch it.

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