

## Public education: the bedrock of a democracy



Maurie Mulheron

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It was Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul who argued that any society that educates more than 10 per cent of its children in private schools can no longer call itself a democracy. Australia is well above that figure. Saul is right.

One very important reason why we value public education is because it is a democratic force. To weaken public education is to attack the very foundations of our democracy.

The first teachers in Australia were, of course, Aboriginal elders who passed on their culture, language, knowledge and skills to their children.

Any notions of a formal schooling system in Australia started to form at the same time that the colony of NSW was established on the land of the Eora people in 1788.

Australia was a penal colony, a large gaol of no return for the British and Irish convicts who were transported here.

Starting life as a gaol meant that the new penal colony was worried about the moral and religious wellbeing of its children, although not necessarily their physical wellbeing.

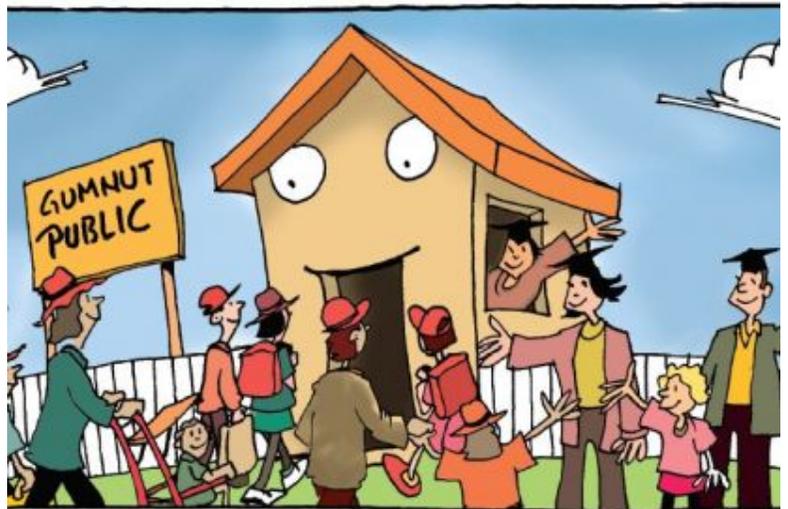
The colonial administrators thought the children would be influenced by parents that they regarded as criminals.

And so some rudimentary education was started, mainly through the work of the church with the Bible as essentially the only printed curriculum document.

Tasmania was the first colony in the British Empire to introduce compulsory schooling in 1868; roll call was invented! This was followed by Queensland, which in 1869 also made schooling free.

England at the time had no national system of education. Indeed, its Australian colonies may have been ahead in many ways. Ireland did, of course, have the national system of schools, and this provided a model for the leaders of the fledgling, far-flung colonies because the Irish national system was not faith based, designed as it was to take in both Protestant and Catholic children.

Victoria followed with the 1872 Education Act, becoming the first part of Australia to introduce “free, secular and compulsory” education.



Victoria was motivated, most likely, by its gold rushes of the 1850s–60s. The government wanted to take this new-found wealth and use it to turn Victoria into a successful industrial colony and for this they needed an educated and literate workforce.

But the origin of public education in Australia, as we know, is really a NSW story with the pivotal player being then-premier Sir Henry Parkes.

Again picking up on the notion of moral education he argued: “How much better to teach the child than to punish the hardened youth; how much cheaper to provide schools than to build gaols; how much more creditable to us as a community to have a long roll of schoolmasters than a longer list of gaolers and turnkeys.”

Parkes was not without his faults, of course. He referred to the Catholic Irish as “jabbering baboons”.

Even so, Parkes treated all religions equally and withdrew all funding from all church schools in 1882. Along with William Wilkins, the first head of the fledgling Department of Education, Parkes pushed for a rigorous system of primary schools that was also free, secular and compulsory.

Parkes’s great achievement was the Public Instruction Act of 1880, which made schooling compulsory for all children between the ages of six to 14.

This was one of the world’s first commitments to ensuring that educating young people was the responsibility of society.

In a nutshell, a compulsory education system for all children is a fairly modern and recent development, no older than about 150 years, not a long time when we consider that human society is many tens of thousands of years old.

Indeed, compulsory public education in England was only introduced as late as 1870.

Free, secular and compulsory were the original guiding principles. Free meant that a child, no matter where he or she was born, deserved to be educated, regardless of parental income. Secular, to ensure a child must be enrolled in a public school regardless of faith.

Compulsory meant the guarantee that society would take responsibility to educate all children by building enough schools and employing enough teachers.

While there have always been adults who have never accepted these principles, a more recent aggressive ideology of “competition and choice” has been promulgated that sees education as a commodity, something to be bought, based on a belief that parents are merely consumers and schools simply products that should be marketed.

The website, My School, is but one manifestation of this as it redefines parents as consumers rather than citizens.

This use of the first person singular possessive “my” is about breaking down notions of a citizenry that work for each other, that is a society that should be about the common good, and replacing it with less democratic and more selfish notions of advantage through possession.

Once this ideology is embedded in a nation’s psyche, then it is so much easier for governments to underfund, shift the cost to individuals and, ultimately, privatise. TAFE is the prime example.

As the year draws to a close, public schools across Australia will be celebrating their achievements, including academic and sporting successes, at assemblies and award nights, most likely with students showcasing their performing arts talents as well.

However, in respect of these individual celebrations the whole is much more than the sum of the parts.

At each public school ceremony we are celebrating the strength of public education as an idea brought to life all those years ago. We are celebrating the fact that its very founding principles — free, secular and compulsory — are the cornerstones of any democracy.

It is no coincidence that Parkes, the driving force behind the Public Instruction Act, is also known as the Father of Federation for championing the cause for Australia to become a single, unified democratic nation.