

Taking God to School: the end of Australia's egalitarian education?

by Marion Maddox. Allen & Unwin, 2014, 296pp, RRP \$29.99.

Tony Brown

Tony Brown is Senior Lecturer, Adult and Organisational Learning, University of Technology, Sydney

The key argument in this book is that the underlying tenets of Australia's school system, which enjoyed a consensus for nearly 100 years, have been gradually undermined over the past forty years. The consequence is that the egalitarian education – that so many believe to be a feature of Australian life – is unravelling and at serious risk. The system that emerged in the latter 19th century was based on establishing compulsory schooling for all that was free and secular, and doing away with the sectarian divide that threatened the peace of the colonies. The chief threat to that system has been the emergence and growing strength of separated private, religious school systems that have been receiving increasing government aid and support for half a century.

Marion Maddox is an authority on the intersection of religion and politics in Australia. The Times Literary Supplement described her major work *God Under Howard: The Rise of The Religious Right in Australian Politics* (2005), as 'an exemplary case study of the interaction between religion and politics in Australia today'. It followed *For God and country: religious dynamics in Australian federal politics* (2001). Together they provide a solid foundation for her focus on religion and schools in *Taking God to School*. This is more than just a chronicling of what is by now a well-known story of governments, both Liberal and Labor, privileging private education and transferring public monies to private schools. Here Maddox crafts a historical narrative, albeit non-linear, that takes us from the mid 18th century up to today's highly contested and fractious disputes over school funding, curriculum policy and the very purpose of schooling.

Her account commences in Queensland in the 1970s with the rise of the Pentecostal and fundamentalist churches and the schools they established. They received critical support from the Bjelke-Petersen government and their attacks on the social sciences curriculum helped them gradually build up what were initially small schools. Maddox presents a detailed account of how these churches smoothly morphed into multi-tiered and vertically integrated businesses as well as political campaigning organisations. It is reminiscent of Thomas Frank's explanation of the rise of the hard right in the Republican Party in Kansas and Texas, which laid the seeds for the later rise of the Tea Party. The fledgling Queensland Churches systematically organised to develop a constituency to pursue their political interests, and received aid and succor from state government ministers. One of the central

figures in this movement was John Gagliardi, author of *The Marketplace: our Mission* (2007) who heard the 'voice of God' and built Citipointe church and Christian College in Brisbane in 1974. In 1990 he set out to evangelise in the Soviet Union and by 1999 had established in Kiev, Ukraine the largest Protestant church in Europe. Even though Gagliardi believes we are nearing 'the end times', Citipointe's 2012 Annual Report carries endorsements from both Campbell Newman and Tony Abbott.

Maddox's argument is that developments in Queensland overturned a century of educational consensus and seeks to trace how this fraying started and has since accelerated. In order to explain how this movement is at odds with the bulk of Australia's education history Maddox returns to the mid 19th century colonial debates to trace how and why the consensus around a secular public education was built. In the early Australian colonies politicians and many religious supported secular education as a means of overcoming the sectarianism and bitterness that by dividing children along religious lines was damaging social cohesion. In NSW Henry Parkes as Colonial Secretary revised the 1866 *Public Schools Act* abolishing the dual school system and in 1880 the *Public Instruction Act* ended state aid for denominational schools. George Higinbotham's 1886 Royal Commission in Victoria considered state aid to private schools as a duplication of services and a waste of scarce public resources. While in South Australia in 1896 voters overwhelmingly supported three referendum questions endorsing secular education. The result was a universal, free and secular school system, which was seen as a means of fostering a pluralist and democratic society.

Australia's school system was composed of a public system comprising local and comprehensive schools, a small number of elite private schools and a Catholic systemic system that relied heavily on deploying unsalaried nuns and brothers to keep costs down. Children attended schools in their neighbourhoods and mixed with others with different abilities and from different backgrounds, making friends with those who lived nearby. Competition between schools and therefore the need for marketing barely existed and schools were not ranked in league tables. Fast forward to the 1960s and Maddox examines how governments started to overturn this long consensus by beginning to divert public money to private education, and using it as a means of gaining political advantage over their opponents. First Robert Menzies in the 1960s began state aid with at least one eye on the dissension it would create within the ALP. This section reminds us just how important and serious this issue was in the 1970s. Gough Whitlam was almost expelled from the ALP for his support of Commonwealth aid to both public and private schools; the ALP National Executive intervened in the Victorian branch when the state Executive opposed state aid and overrode the decision of the parliamentary leader Clyde Holding to support it in the 1970 election campaign. These disputes also gave rise to community groups opposed to state aid such as the DOGS (Defence of Government Schools). The DOGS lodged legal challenges, ran candidates for parliament and as Maddox reminds us instigated a number of creative and inventive public demonstrations that challenge the idea that culture-jamming is just a recent phenomenon. Whitlam's fateful pre-1972 election promise that no school would lose any funding set a norm that politicians ever since have lined up to support. Once elected, Whitlam set up a national Schools Commission under Peter

Karmel, which found that private schools resources ranged from 40–235% of that received by public schools. Whitlam tried to amend his pre-election pledge to mean that only ‘needs based aid’ was intended, not funding for wealthy grammar schools. Malcolm Fraser however used Whitlam’s election commitment as a springboard to increase and spread out the Commonwealth’s support for private schools.

In the final chapters Maddox concentrates on more recent times and notably the ‘Christ-centred, bible-based, taxpayer-funded’ schools. These are the fastest growing sector for enrolments in Australia, with around 130,000 students spread across 500 schools. She introduces a broader readership to new terms such as ‘thematic’ schools, which operate in the belief that the Bible is ‘inerrant’, a 19th century expression meaning that the Bible is free from error in all about which it speaks. Hence these schools teach creationism based on the Genesis account of the world’s creation in six days as literal truth. In general these schools receive a disproportionate amount of state funding, more than even traditional elite private schools, with for example Bible Baptist College in Western Australia receiving 85% of its recurrent funding in 2010 from the state. More importantly though these are ‘one-way’ schools, that is, they expect to receive government funding while at the same time claiming exemption from government regulation especially in the areas of discrimination law and curriculum compliance. Some have a fundamental hostility to the idea of government in general. These schools do however engage in the political scene through well organised and politically-savvy peak lobbying groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL). The ACL won the agreement of Julia Gillard in 2013 to continue the existing exemptions from revised discrimination legislation before she had even referred it to the ALP caucus. Exemptions from the discrimination laws give the school management a powerful weapon to dismiss staff for reasons unrelated to their teaching work and contribute to a very uneven employer-employee relationship. In other instances they have been used to exclude or expel some students on grounds that would not be possible in a state school.

Not content with erecting separated schools for the children of evangelical families, a number of the churches believe they have a role to spread the word in public schools. The challenge here is getting into the schools. Maddox highlights two examples. The first is the programs conducted by the Hillsong Church with its Shine program aimed at girls, and its Strength program directed towards boys. On the surface these programs can appear as strength-based activities intended to build self-esteem and confidence. The real aim though is to reach ‘unchurched’ young people as part of a recruitment program.

The second scheme, the National School Chaplaincy Program, is much better known. Created by John Howard in 2006 Maddox describes how many evangelicals saw it as an opportunity to proselytize and to ‘make disciples’ of children. Some such as Access Ministries used it as a beachhead for other volunteers to follow and form school-based congregations. The original three year program received \$90 million and by 2009 Kevin Rudd announced a further two years funding of \$42million accompanied by a review. Astonishingly Julia Gillard then not only pre-empted the program review by announcing its continuation before the report was delivered but increased the amount to \$222m over three years, a rate more than double that committed by John Howard.

Maddox's main interest is the fundamentalist schools seeing them as being more corrosive of whatever remains of an egalitarian system. However, the serious government money goes to the elite private schools of the establishment, in both per capita student funding but perhaps more importantly in the huge outlays of capital funding for libraries, theatres, aquatic centres, gymnasiums. These schools are not the bible colleges of suburban Perth or Brisbane or the new regions of north-west Sydney but ones that are very well known such as Cranbrook, SCEGGS, Knox, Scotch College, PLC, St Peters Adelaide. These schools are long-standing and connected to established religions yet they too might be seen to find comfort in taking their Bible literally when it suits, and apply a materialistic rather than spiritual interpretation of Matthew's gospel 'For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance'.

This is an important book and successfully brings academic discipline to writing a book for an informed general readership. Some sections such as the arguments around 'neo-liberalism' and Michael Pusey's theory from the early 1990s of the capture of Australia's policy makers bog down. And in other places excursions into religious doctrinal disputes are somewhat arcane for those not so interested in theological clashes among contending Christians. Here can also be detected some umbrage taken by Maddox at the fundamentalists claiming a position of theological superiority over other (mainstream) Christian churches and their beliefs and practices. Currently we are witness to a concerted effort to, in Tony Abbott's words, 'reshape our country'. The potential risk is destroying the foundations of what characterised Australian egalitarianism – universal health care, universal education, and a minimum wage. These are not misguided efforts but rather carefully and consciously developed policy, and they will not stop merely as a result of being exposed. Schools have become a central focus of this effort. The past 40 years has been a battleground of ideology designed to stigmatise public education. But as Maddox points out the 'resacralisation' of Australia's schools took off just when Church attendance and religious adherence were collapsing. She contends that the religiosity of Australia's school systems and of Australia's population is running in opposite directions. In 2013 Christopher Pyne and Tony Abbott made symbolically clear the coalition's support for the Bible-based school sector by launching its election education policy in the hall of the Penrith Christian School. The coalition argues that the private sector should deliver more, and that the free market is more efficient and increased competition is the way to drive quality. But Maddox's book makes clear that as far as education goes this argument ignores important parts of our history. It harks back to early colonial times of division and duplication and one that the nation's founders roundly rejected in favour of a publicly funded secular education. Marion Maddox is right to alert us that the universal public education system is at risk and the dangers inherent in it's undermining.