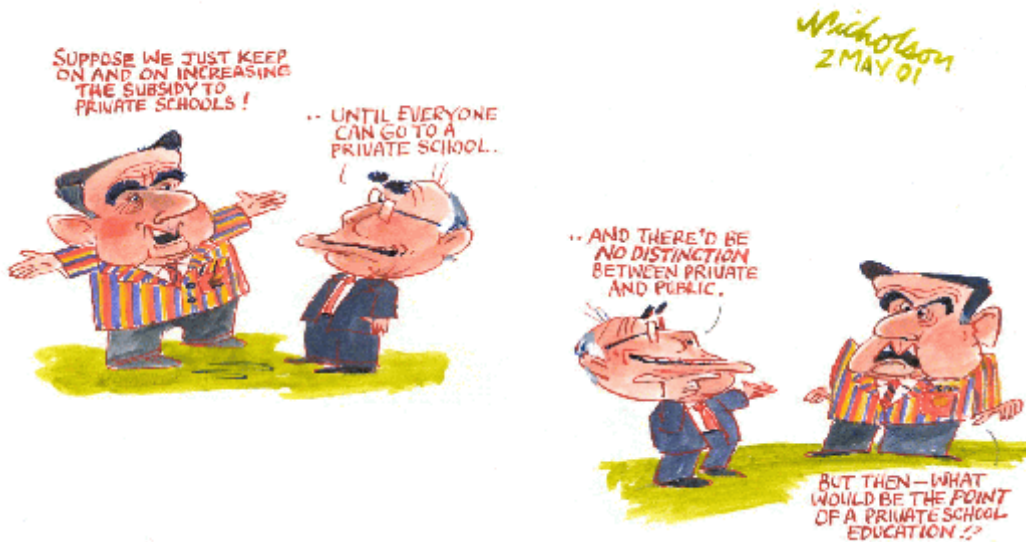




DAVID'S DILEMMA



Cartoon by Peter Nicholson
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Kemp Decoded

HOW DR KEMP DOCTORS THE TRUTH

"One cannot trust a word David Kemp says. He dissembles, he misleads, he misuses statistics and, when all else fails, he lies."

Mike Secombe, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15/10/2000

During the acrimonious and seriously damaging schools funding debate of last year (2000), Kemp was exposed as dangerously ideologically driven, mercilessly pushing his pro-private school agenda. But there is more to it than an obsession with ideology: propaganda is a serious business in politics, and Education Minister David Kemp is a consummate artist in the field.

How does he do it? It is time to make a systematic analysis of his techniques. Presented here is a taxonomy of classic Kemp artifices.

This is a ready reckoner. Next time you get hold of a confusing Kemp media statement, or hear him proffer unexpected "facts" and figures, don't panic - reach for your handy Kemp Decoder!

FACT AND FICTION

Sometimes Kemp's statements are simply not true.

This was particularly evident in the Government propaganda surrounding last year's school funding debate. For example:

- ***"The new arrangements will particularly extend choice to low income families."***

This is a **false statement**. As we know, the "new arrangements" were specifically designed to provide the largest windfall gains in Commonwealth funding to the wealthiest private schools - those that charge fees of \$10,000 or more per year. Kemp argued that these schools had been starved of funds by Labor's funding formula and that they deserved a better deal.

- ***"Our bill pushes fees down."***

Another **false statement**. Kemp was here referring to the wealthy, high-fee schools. Many of these schools actually raised their fees for 2001, in some cases by \$2,000 or more. None are known to have reduced their fees, though one has said that it will cut fees by \$400 in three years' time. (This school, Wesley College, Melbourne, has raised its fees by nearly twice this amount in 2001 alone.)

- ***"The ERI [former funding index] no longer has credibility as a fair measure of need."***

A **baseless statement**. No open consultation was conducted on the ERI's continued suitability and there exists no report that recommends that it be abolished. There is no objective basis for the claim that the ERI was unfair, or even that it was so regarded. The basis for this assertion of "fact" is Kemp's new SES model itself - the one he had specifically designed to replace the ERI. Kemp applies to resource-rich schools his SES measure - intended to advantage the wealthiest schools by proving that they "serve average, not privileged, communities" - and uses the result to discredit the ERI. The ERI measured schools' *actual* resources, a factor completely and deliberately ignored in the SES model.

- ***The SES approach is a more transparent and objective measure..."***

No it isn't. This is an attempt at **truth by assertion**. Kemp has created a system that excludes 65% of the private school sector (Catholic systems), allows a further 15% of schools to remain on the old ERI funding levels and establishes a scale of 65 different payment rates, and 170 discrete levels of payment. This situation is hardly transparent or, it could be argued, objective. It certainly isn't fair.

- ***“This [the 2000-2001 Budget allocation] will fully maintain the Federal Government’s commitment to TAFE....”***

It did not, by any means. This statement is ***false by omission***: it *omits* to tell the truth. The “growth through efficiencies” policy, foisted on the States by Kemp as the key to the ANTA Agreement, forced the States to expand TAFE student numbers substantially, without additional Commonwealth funds. State Ministers had already told Kemp that TAFE was in crisis as a result of this policy of starvation.

Usually, Kemp does not rely on outright lies. Instead he presents the truth in a way that carries a false or misleading implication that he wishes the reader to believe. The literal meaning and exact syntax of Kemp’s statements always need careful analysis. He uses context and careful ambiguity to lead the reader to an interpretation different from what he is exactly and literally saying. The often trivial but literal meaning is what he claims to have intended if he is caught out. His implication, however, can be quite different and is often seriously misleading.

Literally, the meaning of his statements is often virtually empty. For instance:

- ***“The base level of funding for non-government schools at present - that is, the funding of a category 1 school - is maintained as the base in the new model.”***

This carries a ***misleading implication***. It suggests to most readers that the former Category 1 schools will not receive increased funding under the new SES system. In fact, all but two of the (now) 59 schools get more money, with their average increase by 2004 around \$800,000 per school. What is maintained is an equivalent *lowest point on the scale* - not the actual funding of the category 1 schools. The lowest point of funding now applies to only two schools, instead of 59.

- ***“We have seen unprecedented growth in training opportunities and the [1999] Budget initiatives will provide a further boost to the already record numbers of people in training.”***

Another ***false implication***. In fact, contrary to the deliberate implication here that Kemp has funded record growth in TAFE places, the Coalition Government has refused to provide one cent of its share of growth funding for the sector since 1996. The statement actually makes no direct comment on funding, though it might seem to do so.

- ***“This year [1998], Australian universities will have more students in them than ever before and will be better funded than ever before.”***

This striking example from the university sector illustrates perfectly Kemp’s ability to lead the audience astray. Here, Kemp ***uses syntax to create a false impression***. Readers assume that *students* will be better funded than before. But Kemp’s literal claim is actually more modest - that *universities* will be “better funded”: meaning that they will receive more dollars than in the previous year, due to indexation. In fact the Howard Government cut university operating grant forward estimates by 6% in real terms, starting in 1997, and allowed universities to enrol over-quota students at minimal, marginal funding levels. This growth in student numbers has reduced average Commonwealth funding per student substantially.

- ***“Government financial support per pupil for government schools far exceeds government support per pupil for non-government schools.... school funding by the Howard government is a rising proportion of GDP...”***

In this statement, taken from a Kemp media release, Kemp ***uses context to mislead***. The Commonwealth letterhead leads the reader to think that *Commonwealth* spending per student in public schools far exceeds that for private school students. This is not the case. Nowhere in the media release does Kemp even mention the role of the States in funding schools, which is a crucial issue. Furthermore, his next statement, about Commonwealth schools funding and GDP, refers tacitly to both public and private schools: growth in Commonwealth schools expenditure as proportion of GDP is due entirely to massively increased grants to private schools. Kemp does not, however, flag for us that he has conflated the two sectors.

- ***“Australian universities are enjoying record revenues, record enrolments, and record levels of graduate satisfaction.”***

Another case of ***contextual bamboozlement***. This quote from Kemp appears directly under the heading “The Howard Government’s Higher Education Achievements”. It implies that the record revenues and record enrolments are “achievements” of the Government. In fact, per capita Commonwealth funding through operating grants to universities, as well as total per capita funding, has declined in real terms under the current Government, and growth in enrolments has been almost entirely funded at “marginal” rates. The “record revenues” of universities have been boosted by increases in commercial activity: the Commonwealth’s share is shrinking fast.

DECEPTION

Deception is his favourite game. Kemp plays with meaning and double-meaning.

Always have your wits about you. A favourite with Kemp is to compare disparate facts or ideas, while appearing to juxtapose like with like. But he has many ways of leading the unsuspecting audience up the garden path. Don't follow him!

- ***“The SES model provides a good measure of a school community’s capacity to support its school.”***

A case of ***deliberate ambiguity***. Here Kemp deliberately plays on the meaning of the term “school community”. We usually take this to be an *actual* group of parents and others involved with a school. But, as we know, the SES index measures not this actual body of people, but the SES of the “communities” or neighbourhoods in which individual members of the school community live. And obviously those who can afford to choose private schools are generally atypical, rather than typical, of their neighbourhoods. After all, only a minority - 30% - of Australian children attend private schools. They are not typical.

- ***“State/Territory governments have the main responsibility for government school funding.... [The Commonwealth] has always had a bigger role than the States in funding non-government schools.”***

Vague and “slipped” meaning. Kemp notes that the States “have” responsibility for public schools. But he also wants us to believe that the Commonwealth “has always had” a special legislative and funding responsibility for private schools - in the same sense of “to have”. It does not. Constitutionally, education is the responsibility of the States, not the Commonwealth. This includes private as well as public schools. The Commonwealth has *assumed* - and in that sense “had” - a more noticeable role vis a vis private schools over the seventies and eighties, but there is nowhere an explicit agreement that Commonwealth involvement will favour private schools over public.

- ***“The average increase for the 67 schools serving the highest SES communities will be \$184,791 by 2004.”***

An instance of ***selective context-swapping***. This statement was made in response to Labor’s claim that the wealthiest 61 schools would receive an average \$800,000 extra by 2004. But Kemp is responding to a claim about the (then) 61 category 1 schools - the wealthiest under the ERI system - with a counterclaim concerning 67 schools as measured under his new SES model. He repeatedly plays this game, muddying the waters, without drawing attention to what he is actually doing.

- ***“This Bill contains record levels of Commonwealth funding for government schools - higher than Labor ever achieved.”***

Deliberate deception. The quantum of the “increase” that Kemp claims to have delivered to public schools since 1996 is over 26%. But this represents no more than the application of the AGSRC schools funding index - allowing for cost and enrolment increases. Until the negligible increase introduced in the *States Grants Act 2000*, there had been no rise in funding for public schools under the Coalition. If no dollar increases had been provided, the result would have been real-level cuts.

- ***“[Labor] froze the funding for these [private] schools for 15 years.”***

Selective deployment of meaning. Labor “froze” funding for private schools in exactly the same way as the Coalition has “frozen” Commonwealth funding for public schools. No dollar “freeze” was applied. Instead, funding increased automatically, in line with the AGSRC index and enrolments. In this instance Kemp has asserted that applying indexation and covering increases in private school enrolments is tantamount to “freezing” their funds - the contrary of his claim regarding public schools, which, according to Kemp, have been basking in “extra” funds due to his largesse. The AGSRC has been applied to both sectors, not to one only.

- ***“As there is a public benefit in the schooling of every child, it is appropriate that a public funding contribution be made on account of each child.”***

The tactic of bold, ***unsupported assertion.*** The hidden assumption, foisted on the audience, is that, currently, private school students are not subsidised by State or Commonwealth funds. Of course they are, all of them, by both Federal and State Governments. The argument about this principle was won, and lost, thirty years ago. However, in the light of the seventies state aid debate, it is clear that Kemp’s proposition is far from self-evident. Many people still believe that every child should be *offered* a high quality government-funded education in a public school, but, if that offer is declined, the responsibility of government to pay for schooling should cease.

- ***“RECORD HIGH IN NEW APPRENTICESHIP NUMBERS”***

This publicity headline nicely illustrates Kemp’s use of ***misleading terminology.*** He dubbed his revamped vocational training system “New Apprenticeships” so that announcements about overall numbers, or funding, connected with the program might appear to refer to “new” students and extra funds. Also included under “New Apprenticeships” are the former one- or two-year low-level traineeships, which in fact account for the majority of growth in “apprenticeship” numbers. The “record high” referred to in this headline is in fact the *total* number of apprenticeships and traineeships - not some record-breaking increase in “new” opportunities for training.

DOING A NUMBER WITH NUMBERS

This is where Kemp, with his sheer audacity, takes the breath away. He is a master at manipulating the figures.

Never take those he presents at face value. Look at **these examples**:

- ***“...of the 21% of school students who come from families with an annual income less than \$26,000 - 20% attend a non-government school.”***

Selection of figures with intention to deceive. At first glance this looks as though the proportion of children from low-income families attending private schools is equivalent to their population share. But what it means is that only a fifth of these children go to private schools, compared to over half of those in the highest income group. It masks, as well, the fact that most farmers and many self-employed professionals minimise their taxable income by means of elaborate schemes and trusts. This is one reason why the Kemp SES index “proves “ that elite boarding schools such as King’s Parramatta and Geelong Grammar serve communities whose incomes are relatively modest.

- ***“Across Year 3 and Year 5 in both literacy and numeracy [in NSW] the proportion of students in the lower bands of achievement has increased, whilst the proportion achieving the higher bands has fallen.”***

Cheating. This statement appeared in a media release attacking the NSW Government’s handling of literacy and numeracy teaching. Included were tables showing the State’s results over the period 1998-2000. With the exception of Year 3 literacy results which, on any possible reading, show a small but negative change, the figures do not show the trends as claimed by Kemp. In fact, results have either stayed the same or have improved slightly. The only way to reach Kemp’s stated conclusions would be to deploy inconsistent definitions of the terms “lower bands” and “higher bands” for each table presented - to suit Kemp’s case.

- ***“... Commonwealth payments to the States for government schools have risen by 18 per cent in real terms since 1995-96.”***

Deliberate use of the wrong index. Usually, the standard AGSRC schools index is taken as the most accurate deflator for calculating “real” funding increases. Here, Kemp departs from normal practice, without providing an explanation or justification. His 18% figure is based on a calculation that subtracts CPI increases from the usual AGSRC index, thus implicitly claiming that the AGSRC does not indicate actual school system cost increases - but is somehow overly generous. He implies that the difference between CPI and the AGSRC represents a “real” increase. Of course, it does not.

DON'T BE FOOLED!

As you will see by now, Kemp has method, but not madness - though he might sometimes appear obsessed. He is a clever manipulator of words and statistics. Through his creative approach to the facts, the spin he applies to his policies and a wondrous way with figures, he manages to bamboozle the media and public into dazed acquiescence, or at the very least confusion. Decoding his claims can take close, critical analysis. Explaining his deceptions can be challenging. But do not be fazed. Approach with cautious scepticism.

The fact remains that, over the past six years, David Kemp and the Coalition have done precious little to strengthen and enhance public education and much to undermine it. Don't be fooled by his dishonest fooling about.

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