

OPINION PIECE

**A Perverse Consequence of
Conservative Education Policy: The Rise
of Ethno-Religious Schooling**

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You may recall that John Howard was a fervent opponent of multiculturalism; while Opposition leader in 1988 he had the Coalition parties drop it as policy, and once in power its agencies were the first for the chop. Anguished by his realisation that Geoffrey Blainey's "nation of tribes" lay in Australia's future if he remained inactive, Howard stressed the unitary qualities of his vision for Australian society. For him the Anglo-Australian middle ground was the touchstone for core values. So it's surprising that one of the main charges against multiculturalism, that it would lead to ethnic ghettos, has been accelerated by Howard's education policy now adopted almost without change by the Rudd/Gillard administration.

It is well known that there has been a rapid expansion in children being sent to non-government schools over the past decade (though the rate may be stumbling in the face of the economic crisis). The process has been facilitated by a major commitment of Commonwealth funding to the independent sector, generating thereby an explosion in ethno-religious schools. I use the term in a catholic sense – including everyone from Scots Presbyterians to Greek Orthodox to Jewish to Muslim to Anglican to Hari Krishna (and Catholics). They are ethno-religious because they include faith as a criterion for admission, or teacher selection, or religious curriculum or "values" education.

The British government has found that ethno-religious schools may have been a factor in the creation of what it criticises as "parallel" communities, with little contact, awareness or interest in people from "outside". Such schooling may have contributed to so-called "white flight", a break-down in social order, and wide-spread alienation among minority youth. Has Australia been going down the same road, in significant diversion from our earlier history where public education was a key institution of social integration?

During the years of huge post-war immigration, most children went into state schools. In areas of immigrant settlement, these schools saw children from dozens of national origins and language backgrounds mixing together, playing sport, learning inter-cultural skills by osmosis, and becoming that eclectic mix of cultures that today we call Australian. Integration occurred through processes of adaptation, where children from different cultures drew from each other, "trading" knowledge (and food) in playground and classroom interactions. Similar stories (though with a slightly constrained clientele) took place in the Catholic diocesan schools of working class suburbs.

The multicultural policies of the 1980s and early 1990s built on these interactions, introducing community languages, building the confidence of children by valuing the cultural differentiation of the classroom, and drawing often reticent parents into an engagement with the wider Australia society through the schools their children attended. As those children became adults, they simply assumed Australia was a multicultural, diverse society, and they had the skills to operate within it comfortably. They could move between their communities of origin and the wider world with seamless ease, valuing both. Moving forward a decade and a half, we now have a proliferation of separated monocultural education environments, their students condemned to the relentless pursuit of "bonding" social capital, with little opportunity to mix in a sustained and unforced

manner with children from different backgrounds, families and values. Moreover, abandoned state schools (in the sense that the cultural mix has been removed) face bigger challenges to carry out their own roles of social integration and civic citizenship.

Parents choose what they see as the best pathways for their children (and themselves); communities seek to reproduce their values, cultures and power; the wider society needs the bridging capital created through the integration of children into the wider world. There are clear tensions between these levels, and it is the responsibility of government to analyse the situation, and seek a balance that ensures societal harmony and long-term social cohesion. Current policy may well deliver the opposite outcomes.