

Maurie Mulheron guides us through the creation of the public education system in Australia. He examines the essential role that public education plays within our democracy and explains its fundamental principles. He then alerts us to the reasons why it should be so valued, and protected, by us all . . .

It was the Canadian philosopher, John Ralston Saul, who argued that any nation that educates a large percentage of its children in private schools might no longer be able to call itself a true democracy. By international standards, Australia has a very high proportion of its children enrolled in private schools – schools that have legislated protection to exclude most children.

Ralston Saul (2001) argued, “As for public education, it is a simile for civilized democracy. You could say that public education is the primary foundation in any civilized democracy. That was one of the great discoveries of western civilization in its modern form in the middle of the 19th century. Any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of democracy.”ⁱ

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

John Ralston Saul was right to remind us that the creation of public education was a deliberate act. It exists in this country because some enlightened people fought for it in the nineteenth century, and countless others have defended it ever since. Therefore, perhaps it is worth recalling our history. As the great Czech writer, Milan Kundera (1979), wrote, “The struggle of people against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”ⁱⁱ

Any notions of a formal education system of schools in Australia began at the same time that the colony of New South Wales was started in 1788. Australia was a penal colony, effectively a large gaol of no return for the English and Irish prisoners who were transported here. From 1788 until 1868, over 160,000 convicts were transported to the colonies in Australia, the vast majority for petty crimes or political acts.

Contrary to popular myth, the main purpose of transportation was not to alleviate overcrowded gaols in England – it would have been much cheaper just to build more gaols than to send ships halfway around the world to unknown shores. But with the loss of the profitable colonies of north America, following the end of the American Revolutionary War in 1783, transportation would give Britain a ready supply of slave labour, in the form of convicts, to build new colonies in order to maintain the expansion of the British Empire.

In many respects, starting life as a gaol meant that some officials, within the new penal colony, were worried about the moral and religious well-being of its children, although not necessarily their physical well-being. They thought the children of convicts would be influenced adversely by their criminal parents and so some rudimentary education was started, mainly through the work of the Church, with the Bible essentially the only printed curriculum document.

Tasmania was the first colony in the British Empire to introduce compulsory schooling in 1868. This was followed by Queensland which in 1869 also made schooling free.

England, at the time, had no real 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 many leaders of the fledgling, far-flung colonies. Why? Because Irish National Schools had strict rules regarding the boundaries between religious and non-religious education: designed as they were 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, in many respects, by its gold rushes of the 1850s-1860s. The colonial government wanted to take this new-found wealth and use it to turn Victoria into a successful industrial colony and for this to happen, the more enlightened leaders argued, they needed an educated and literate citizenry.

But the credit for public education in Australia, as we know it today, belongs to Henry Parkes.

Again picking up on the notion of moral education he stated, “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, 1863)ⁱⁱⁱ

Parkes pushed for a rigorous system of primary schools that was to be free, secular and compulsory.

Free, secular and compulsory were the guiding principles. *Free* meant that a child, no matter where he or she was born, deserved to be educated, regardless of parental income; *secular* -that a child must be enrolled in a public school regardless of faith, or no faith; and, *compulsory* - that society would take responsibility to educate all children, as well as build enough schools and employ enough teachers.

Parkes’s great achievement in this policy area was the Public Instruction Act of 1880, which made schooling compulsory for all children between the ages of six to fourteen. This was one of the world’s first commitments to ensuring that the job of educating young people was the responsibility of society. William Wilkins became the first under-secretary in the new Department of Public Instruction. Wilkins had been greatly influenced by the Swiss educator, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, an advocate of child-centred learning.

Parkes was not without his faults, of course. He referred to the Irish as ‘jabbering baboons.’ But he did treat all religions equally and withdrew all funding from all church schools in 1882.

Of course, the other great political achievement of Parkes was nationhood, the creation of a modern unified nation through Federation. Parkes, the nation builder, saw his two major achievements as the replacing of faith-based private schools with a public education system and the uniting of six former colonies into the Commonwealth of Australia, as inextricably linked.

What is remarkable is that a free, secular and compulsory education system for all children is a 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.

And again, if we consider Kundera's warning that the struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting, we can see that it is important to remember these foundation principles of public education: open to all regardless of race, religion, parental wealth, location, or ability. These are, of course, fundamental notions that underpin a democracy and we ignore them at our peril. If we accept that the right to education is a human right, then these notions bring obligations that society must meet. But when a nation's education system reinforces social advantage, makes religion or race or ability or wealth distinguishing features of its schools, then these democratic rights are compromised.

There are more recent ideological threats to public education that have occurred in the last 30 years based on 'choice theory', the natural offspring of neo-liberal economics, which turns education into an individual choice; a commodity that can be purchased. These moves, to turn parents into consumers, undermine the very foundation of a modern, democratic education system.

Once this ideology is embedded in a nation's psyche, we break down the notion of a citizenry that works for each other (that is, a society that is about the common good) and replace it with less democratic, and more selfish, notions of advantage over others. Education becomes another market. This marketisation of education accentuates difference, the selling point, whether that be based on class or religion or race or wealth or ability. What markets create is a stratified education system of winners and losers, where individual advantage is valued more than social equality. But this, over time, has a serious negative social impact.

After all, the purpose of public schooling is about much more than the education of an individual. It has a profound social purpose, recognised 150 years ago, which has to do with nation building. One of its essential social benefits is to take individual students from a diverse range of backgrounds and create community, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

And this is the great moral purpose of public education: to achieve for all. Not for one. Not just for some. For all.

ⁱ Saul ,JR 'In defence of public education' - talk given to Canadian Teachers' Federation, Whitehorse, Yukon, July 13, 2001

ⁱⁱ Kundera, M 1979, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

ⁱⁱⁱ Parkes, H -spoken in 1863 - published in *Speeches On Various Occasions Connected With the Public Affairs of New South Wales 1848-1874*, Melbourne, 1876, p.169.

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Maurie Mulheron began his teaching career in 1978 in the outer south-western suburbs of Sydney and taught in a number of high schools in rural, regional and metropolitan New South Wales (NSW).

From 2001-2011, Maurie was Principal of Keira High School in the regional city of Wollongong, NSW. In 2011, he received an award from the NSW Department of Education for "Excellence in Leadership Demonstrated by a Principal".

Maurie was elected to the full-time position of President of the NSW Teachers Federation President in 2012 and held that position until January 2020 leading the union's many campaigns on salaries and working conditions, schools funding, against the privatisation of the vocational education sector, in defence of teaching standards, and in opposition to mass testing and league tables.

Maurie represented the NSW Teachers Federation on the Federal Executive of the national union, the Australian Education Union (AEU), for over twenty years. From 2015-2020, he held the position of Deputy Federal President of the AEU.

He also represented the AEU at a number of international forums and conferences including Education International's Global Response Network which coordinated opposition to the growing commercialisation and privatisation of education.

Maurie served on the state government's NSW Education Standard Authority's Quality Teaching Committee and was a member of the University of Sydney's Teacher Education Advisory Board (TEAB).