

In praise of secular education

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG 2 December 2009*

As I walked to this speech day, through the faded decadence of the *State Theatre* in Sydney, I must admit that I turned over in my mind the question: 'What's a nice public school boy like you doing in a place like this?'

Here I find myself at the annual celebration of what is possibly Australia's most famous *private* school. Yet I am a proud product of *public* education. All of my school years were spent in public schools: North Strathfield School on Concord Road; Summer Hill Opportunity School and Fort Street High School in Petersham. It makes me sad to see politicians and others, many of whom have benefited from education in public schools, attacking those schools and disadvantaging them financially. It is in the interests of *all* Australians to support education and not to sideline public education.

In my mind, however, in the private school stakes, I have always made a special exception for Sydney Grammar School. In fact, although it is wealthy and well-endowed, I regard it as a kind of public school. So I ask myself, why I have so long felt that way?

When I compare this school with my own high school, Fort Street High, there are many similarities:

- * You too were founded in the early days of Australia in the nineteenth century; Fort Street in 1849 and Grammar in 1854;
- * You are able to boast of famous *alumni*, including Sir Edmund Barton, the first Prime Minister, who started his education at Fort Street and finished it at Grammar;
- * You are a school with an unyielding dedication to excellence in education;
- * You are unashamedly committed to the sometimes unfashionable proposition that achievements in education are objectives good in themselves, for which no apology needs to be given;
- * You are a day school, rejecting the somewhat barbarous habit, found in England but not in Europe, of taking young children from their parents in their vulnerable years;
- * You have very strong traditions of student activities outside the sweat shop – music, drama, debating, sport, choral, community activities. Your students choose and there is little compulsion;
- * You don't lose too much sleep over the cycles of sporting prowess;
- * You exhibit a healthy dose of zaniness, in the sense that you encourage students to find their own inner voice;
- * You are a microcosm of the future of Australia: multicultural, multiracial and diverse;
- * You have wonderful, dedicated teachers who devote their lives to giving the next generation of students the opportunity to flourish; and
- * You are a selective school which embraces the proposition that gifted students, who will often be called upon to make extra efforts in life in leading our society, sometimes have differing educational needs that only special schools can fully cater for.

So forgive me. But I feel at home today.

In my years at Fort Street, there were fewer than ten boys at the whole school from ethnic backgrounds other than the British Isles. In 1955, fewer than three or four who were ethnic Asians. Now, like Grammar and other selective high schools in Sydney, half or more than half of school, come from non-Anglo backgrounds – often now in the second generation.

In my first year at High School, one of my prefects was John Yu. Even then, he was accomplished. Later he was to become a professor of paediatrics, and Australian of the Year, Chancellor of the University of New South Wales, preceding Grammar's Chairman, David Gonski. It must have been lonely for him in those days of the 1950s. His life is one of many precious examples of how, in the matter of prejudice – racial, religious, gender and sexuality, we in Australia are gradually growing up.

* Justice of the High Court of Australia (retired; 1996-2009)

THE PRECIOUS GIFT OF SECULARISM

However, the greatest similarity between Sydney Grammar School and the public schools of this nation (and a dissimilarity to most of the private and systemic schools) is that this is a secular school. It is not dedicated to any particular religious belief. It is not run by, or for, a religious order or church or temple. Its charter promised that it will be 'non-denominational'. These words have been interpreted as meaning 'secular'. That was the innovation by which Sydney Grammar led the way to the great developments in public education in the Australian colonies that were achieved in the 1870s and 1880s.

Until that time, in Australia, such schooling as there was (particularly advanced schooling) was substantially in the hands of private entrepreneurs and religious orders. Most of them fought hard against the passage of the *Public Education Acts*. They denounced education without a full infusion of Christian beliefs. Many attacked the public schools as hotbeds of dangerous "socialism".

Fortunately, the advocates of public education won that particular battle. The system of public schools was created throughout the Australian continent. In many respects, it followed the democratic principles of public education in the United States. But whereas in the United States, more than 90% of young citizens are still educated in public schools, in the melting pot of shared American civic values, in Australia, secular public education (at least in secondary school) extends to just over 60% of the nation's children. Most of the balance are now educated in schools that have a religious connection.

Having myself been raised in a religious belief, as an Anglican of the Protestant tradition of the Sydney Diocese, I understand fully the value of religious instruction when one is young. I acknowledge the utility of a spiritual preparation and of ethical enlightenment. In every society, every day, countless problems are presented to us that require moral choices to be made. So how do we, in public schools and at schools like Grammar, face up to that necessity? We do so by observing the principle of secularism. Whatever may be our beliefs in our hearts and at home, when we enter the school gates, we acknowledge the space that must be left for private convictions. We do not attempt to enforce upon immature children or school staff a particular religious conviction.

This principle of secularism is one of the greatest developments of human rights in our world. My proposition is that it is a development that we must safeguard and protect for it can come under threat in contemporary Australia.

Secularism grew out of the bloody religious struggles of England. Secularism permitted private conscience to flourish and diversity to exist alongside official orthodoxy. It was secularism that got rid of the exclusion of Roman Catholics from participating in parliamentary elections in Britain. It was tolerant secularism that made the cruelties of the German Nazis to the Jews of Europe so specially shocking to those raised in England and its Empire. It is secularism that defends the rights of children who have *no* religious beliefs to a private space. It is secularism that acknowledges the changing character of Australian society and the increasing numbers in our population who are *not* specifically Christian. They may have other religions like Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. Or they may have no religious beliefs at all but only fundamental rules of humanism, ethical traditions or perhaps the principles of universal human rights.

In public schools, the compromise with the opponents of public education led to the inclusion of an obligation, by law, to provide the churches every week an hour to give scripture instruction to their followers. This remains the law. I myself attended scripture classes at school. Indeed, my teacher, Canon Stuart Barton-Babbage AM, is still a firm friend.

But in public schools today, about 50% or 60% of students in later years do not attend these scripture classes. Until now, they have been put in other classrooms and left to their own devices. Colouring-in or early dismissal to go home has been the way this shift in demographics has been managed.

Two weeks ago, the Premier of New South Wales (Mr. Nathan Rees) announced the intended introduction into public schools of ethics courses based on a programme prepared by the St.

James Ethics Centre. These courses will be an alternative to 'scripture'. They will allow instruction in *secular* ethical systems; but also in the moral principles of diverse religions. One might consider this a specially useful development in multi-cultural and multi-religious Australia. I applaud this initiative. It stands beside the continuation of a huge subvention of millions of dollars announced by the Prime Minister last week, for religious chaplains for public and other schools.

It is good to have competing moral principles taught and debated in our schools. It is not good to envisage religious instruction that denies all knowledge about controversies that the students will have to face on leaving the school gates. Like knowledge about the universal rights of women. Like knowledge about the existence of homosexuals and their rights. Like knowledge about the debates concerning in vitro fertilisation and therapeutic cloning of human cells. Like awareness of the conflicting views that exist in our society about abortion. Like knowledge of HIV and the use of condoms to reduce its spread. Like appreciation of the great diversity of Australia which is one of the strengths of our country and not a weakness.

In recent weeks, I learned to my surprise that teachers in some Australian religious schools are dismissed because they fall pregnant whilst not married. Or because they are revealed as gay. Or of students who are removed from school because of their sexuality. Happily, that cannot happen in a secular school. And it cannot occur in public education. It cannot happen at Sydney Grammar School.

The truth is that we must build in Australia a diverse, creative and aware nation, alert to the dilemmas of competing moral and ethical principles that beset humanity. This can, of course, be achieved in religious and private schools, so long as they too are open to instruction about different value systems and opinions. But it is more likely to happen, I suggest, in public schools and in schools like Grammar. Non-denominational, non-dogmatic and secular. This is not a denial of religion. But it is an assignment of the religious dimension to a private space and a signal of the recognition that, in that private space, we must all be aware and respectful of competing religious and ethical beliefs.

Today, in Melbourne, all of the religions of the world gather together in a huge conference. So on this day, we can affirm in Australia that the secular principle is one by which we live. We respect all the religions of our people. But we do so under conditions that all religions respect the beliefs of others and also the beliefs of those who reject religion altogether.

I praise Sydney Grammar School as a great exemplar of excellence in education. As a true fulfilment of education for 'all classes and beliefs'. I praise Grammar as a creative school of great traditions. But above all, I praise this School as a secular school that respects the beliefs of all and imposes religious beliefs on none.

The Hon Michael Kirby AC CMG is a former justice of the High Court of Australia - <http://www.michaelkirby.com.au/>