

RELIGIOUS SCHOOL TEACHING

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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During the last few days two Federal Government ministers have come out in support of paying money from the taxes to Roman Catholic schools. Mr Frazer, the Federal Minister for Education and Science, said that he believed that to have two educational systems competing with each other, would lead to an improvement in education. But the facts of history and the logic of economics contradict Mr Frazer. Last century Australia began with the dual system of education in which the Government ran its schools and Church denominations ran their schools with Government support, but instead of leading to better education as Mr Frazer thinks this system does, it resulted in a very inferior education. The big centres of population had three or four schools in the same locality, the children being divided between Government, Church of England, Roman Catholic and other denominational schools and each school was smallish and inefficient, while in outlying districts there was no school at all because there was no Government money to subsidize these schools, for the money was being spent over running three or four redundant schools in those towns where there were enough children to be divided amongst the small schools which each denomination had established and which were being maintained with Government money.

England still has the dual system, but finds it unsatisfactory and is moving more and more in the

direction of a unified educational system. A single educational system has its dangers, but these can be guarded against by a broad based control rather than by Mr Frazer's suggestion of multiplying schools so that each should compete with the other, some government controlled, some independent. However, his suggestion destroys the very thing he values, as schools cease to be independent as soon as they rely on government money. When the system now being advocated by Mr Frazer was abolished in New South Wales in 1880, the Act setting up our present system was passed by an overwhelming majority of members of Parliament. If now, as a result of sectional pressures, politicians want to return to the old system of several competing schools in each locality, they should do so only as a result of a referendum, because it means a great reversal of the whole way our educational system has been organized in the last ninety years. It is irresponsible for politicians without much experience in the area of education to talk and worse still to act in this matter when we all know that the pressure to which they are responding, is sectional. Australia is not able to support two complete systems of education from the taxes. Moreover, once the policy of subsidizing independent schools becomes firmly established, and the subsidy becomes a significant sum, it will not rest with two systems, but other denominations will quite rightly enter

the field besides the Roman Catholic denomination and re-establish their schools.

This brings me to my second point, for not only is Mr Frazer's suggestion a bad one educationally but it is a very unfair one, unless he makes provision for the re-establishing of schools by those denominations who in 1880 supported the community's decision to build up a single educational system to the highest standard possible and allowed their own parochial schools to close, maintaining only one or two larger schools. Before 1880 the Church of England had more schools than any other denomination. It was not anxious to close these schools, but when the Government decision was made, it directed its educational resources into teaching religion in the Government schools rather than in maintaining its own parochial schools, and as a result its schools were closed. If now the Government reverses the community's decision of 1880 and re-establishes a dual system of education paid for from the taxes, it is bound in fairness to work the system in such a way that those denominations which would be anxious under the new system to re-establish their own network of schools should be enabled to do so.

The Roman Catholics in 1880 were forbidden to send their children to Government schools by the Pope and right to the present time Roman Cath-

olic parents have no option in the matter of education of their children. They are obliged by canon law to send their children willy nilly to a church school. Only the bishop has the right to say whether the child can go elsewhere. I quote from canon 1374 of the current Roman Catholic Canon Law: "The bishop alone has the right in accordance with the instruction of the Pope to decide under what circumstances it may be tolerated that Catholic children should attend other than Catholic schools." That is, the bishop, not the parents decides the school the child goes to. Roman Catholics in urging subsidies for their schools sometimes say that it is unfair to parents that they should not have a choice of school. But this is hardly a straightforward argument for Roman Catholics to use since their own church forbids parents any choice in the matter and restricts the right of saying where the children of a family can go to school, other than a church school, to the bishop alone.

I am not in favour of subsidizing from the taxes this form of authoritarianism in Australia. However, if the Government in order to gain electoral advantage wishes to promise larger grants to church schools, in fairness it ought to shape its legislation to enable other denominations to rebuild their parochial schools which they allowed to close in order to co-operate with the Government in 1880. However, there is no doubt that

this policy of subsidizing more than one education system - and it must mean a plurality of systems in the Australian community - will lead to educational inferiority because there is not enough money for education as it is, let alone for establishing and maintaining redundant schools.

The other Federal minister to speak on this subject was Mr Bowen the Attorney General. He made some extraordinary remarks in which he implied that the only schools which gave the children access to spiritual values were independent schools. This remark is grossly insulting to the many faithful headmasters and headmistresses and masters and mistresses in the state school system as well as ignoring the devoted service of the protestant clergy and others who for generations have visited the state schools week by week to teach all the children Christian values. Our state school system is not a system which is based on secular values. The Bible is required to be read in the general curriculum and provision for special instruction according to the denominational tenets is made week by week within the curriculum. This was established in the Act of 1880 in New South Wales. The clergy and Christian laymen of the Protestant denominations have faithfully taught in the Government schools in New South Wales since 1880 and for this they got and still get no remuneration. In other words the Church people pay for the cost of this relig-

ious education of children in Government schools. The Roman Catholics, however, for generations after 1880 refused to teach in this way in the Government schools and spent their money and energies in building up their own parochial school system. As I have said it would be grossly unfair to reward them for this by subsidies, while ignoring completely the devoted labours of other denominations doing their duty of teaching children in Government schools without remuneration.

If there is any alteration of the system, the first thing to be done is that the Government should provide money for the salaries of those who engage in religious instruction in their own Government schools. In this way a great burden would be taken off the shoulders of the parishes and the clergy who would be able to get on with their other parochial duties more efficiently, and at the same time it would be possible to provide better religious instruction to Government school pupils since it would be possible to enlist and train more full-time religious teachers qualified for the state schools, if the Government would make grants towards their salaries. At present church people have to find all this money.

If there is any money to go towards the denominations in education it ought not be paid to those schools which have been maintained in defiance

of Government policy, but firstly it should go to supply the salaries of religious teachers of those denominations which have co-operated over the years with the Government, but which are no longer able to maintain in these days of rising efficiency in education the same free service.

We agree with Mr Bowen that we do not want a secular education. We never have had one in New South Wales; but in order to ensure that we should not have any danger of this in the future the Government should provide funds for the payment of religious instructors who teach within the curriculum of the State schools. It is most unfair that this protestant religious instruction in Government schools should continue to be given gratis and without financial aid from the Government now that the Government is paying out money to Roman Catholic schools in which Roman Catholic religious instruction is so prominent a part of the curriculum.

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