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How think tanks are failing us

By Scott Prasser

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It has become a popular pastime for politically engaged Australians to lament the quality of our public policy discussion. Decisions on big issues affecting the national interest are more often made on the basis of populism and prejudice than evidence and exchange of ideas. A similar cry can be heard in most western democracies, with daily updates on the US presidential primaries giving us a clear view of where we are heading, to a polarised world of clashing ideologies, rigidly held positions and the cult of personality, only rarely tempered by real communication, balanced discussion or rigorous analysis.

Australia is unfortunately highly competitive in the race between advocacy and thoughtful intellectual debate and we are not on the side of the angels. No wonder that Lindsay Tanner, former Finance Minister in the Rudd Labor Government struck a chord when he decried the dumbing down of democracy in his timely book, *Sideshow*. Observing the sacrifice of big ideas and crucial reforms for 'announceables' and 'soundbites,' Tanner put in a plea for more considered, thoughtful analysis of complex social and economic issues. What we need if the quality of democracy is to be preserved are thinkers rather than showmen, policy analysts rather than ideologues, more substance and less form.

To many, the proliferation in Australia during the last couple of decades of think tanks, research bodies and consultancy firms, contesting the public policy space and ever ready to provide advice to government, for a fee, and to publish opinion pieces on all manner of issues under the guise of informing the public suggests that Australian policy discourse may not be as bereft as Tanner fears. Maybe after all there is a world of ideas and informed experts out there beyond the political zone, ready to satisfy the public's appetite for information, discussion and debate.

Such hopes are doomed to disappointment when the evidence is examined. Sadly, the growing number of think tanks and consultants-for-sale is part of the problem, not the solution. Contestability was once seen as the saviour of high quality public sector policy advice. The capacity of the public bureaucracy to provide innovative and creative advice was expected to be strengthened by the growth of alternate sources of policy opinion with different perspectives and with access to strong data and well-honed analytical skills. Unfortunately, in this instance, the promise that competition will raise quality across the board has not been fulfilled.

Effective participation in public debate by "policy experts" would indeed be a spur to greater policy capability within government and make a valuable contribution to public policy development if the opinions expressed were drawn from real world evidence, if they acknowledged the complexities of any policy issue and if they favoured intellectual rigour over ideology. Instead, what we generally get is opinion disguised as analysis, rhetoric masking research and a set of false assumptions and half truths pretending to be irrefutable fact leading inevitably to flawed and simplistic policy conclusions.

A case in point is some of the recent research and policy opinion on the highly polarised issue of non-government school funding. By appointing an independent committee of inquiry under the chairmanship of David Gonski to examine the fairness, efficiency and effectiveness of school funding arrangements, the Rudd and Gillard governments followed the well accepted method of setting up an expert external public inquiry to achieve a sound and lasting solution to a long-standing policy problem. No matter what its conclusions when the Gonski Report is finally released in February this year, this particular public inquiry falls well short of the standard expected of a well-resourced objective policy review. It has failed to contribute to the public debate from its own expertise, it has not attempted to improve understanding of the issues or challenge fixed ideological positions and it has generated a huge volume of opinion and research, much of it of dubious quality, yet presented this for public consumption without comment or analysis.

The four major research studies commissioned by the Gonski Review to underpin its final conclusions demonstrate the variable quality of contributions to public policy development from outside the public sector. One study,

"Schooling Challenges and Opportunities" was conducted at considerable expense to the public purse by the Nous Group, a consultancy specialising in public policy and laying claim to "extensive expertise in enhancing skills in developing public policy." The Nous Group's research study starts with a flawed premise, that non-government schools select students on the basis of academic performance. On the contrary, most non-government schools are not academically selective. In fact, the main selective enrolment practices occur in the high-performing well resourced selective public high schools which are supported by several states. The study is highly selective in the research it relies on, ignoring research findings from reputable sources that do not fit with the group's own apparently entrenched ideological position, that non-government schooling exacerbates educational disadvantage. Many academic and OECD-sponsored studies however provide ample evidence of the value of choice and competition in schooling to education quality, the benefits of autonomy and public support for private schooling for all students, and the various school-related factors which reduce the dependence of student achievement on socio-economic background. Yet the policy recommendations of this consultancy group have the same weight in the public arena as the really expert analysis of other work commissioned by the review.

That there is a need to engage the public in questioning and discussing the realities of non-government school funding is well illustrated by the number of articles appearing in the media perpetuating tired old myths and misinformation. One such recent article by Richard Denniss, executive director of the Australia Institute appeared in the Canberra Times on 14 January. Self-styled as "the country's most influential progressive think tank," the Canberra-based organisation is "dedicated to develop and conduct research and policy analysis and to participate forcefully in public debates."

Denniss argues that non-government schools are exclusive, that they carefully choose high achieving students and that they drain public education of resources. It is salutary to address just a few of the false assumptions and insinuations in this article for a glimpse at the lack of rigour, depth and objectivity in this analysis of the present situation. The one-third of Australian parents who choose a non-government school for their children are by no means an exclusive section of society. They are a significant minority. They are socially diverse, and come from all income levels. School choice is more about values and attitudes, community and culture, than about class and wealth. These parents all contribute to the cost of public education, through the taxation system. On top of that, they choose to make a significant investment from their after-tax income in their children's schooling – on average, 43 per cent of the income of non-government schools comes from parents, not the public purse. The few larger and highly visible 'wealthier' schools are 80 per cent funded by parents.

Nor are these parents moaning about the contribution they make through their taxes to public education, even though they do save the taxpayer an estimated \$8 billion a year by choosing the non-government system. Most Australians see the benefit of a healthy high quality education system across the board, and value the diversity which thrives in Australia's system of government and non-government schooling. There is clear evidence to show that encouraging private investment by providing public funding to non-government schools on a needs basis is a sound policy for raising the quality of schooling across the nation.

These counter-claims are all significant and should at least be addressed if not agreed in order to reach a sound policy conclusion.

Denniss posits a "campaign to undermine the public education system." This is an ideological position, unsupported by any evidence. The only signal of such a campaign comes from the arch-defenders of public schooling who constantly talk down the quality of public schools, depicting them as underfunded refuges for the disadvantaged. Nothing could be further from the truth, if the real and transparent evidence about levels of per student funding, the socio-economic composition of both school sectors, literacy and numeracy test results and end-of-school achievement data are assessed objectively. There are good and bad schools in both sectors and the most significant differences in performance occur within schools. This is the evidence that a policy think tank should be expected to examine and present to the public.

The fallacy that private schools discriminate when choosing students has already been discussed. The myth that the higher achievement levels of non-government schools are attributable to student selection flies in the face of the facts, if a policy analyst cared to examine them, that school-related factors such as high expectations of all students, an academic environment, discipline and autonomy in hiring staff make a difference to student achievement.

What Denniss is doing under the guise of policy debate is engaging in advocacy, driving an anti-private school position, despite his disclaimer that he believes parents should be able to send their children to private schools. On the same day as the Denniss article appeared, the Federal School Education Minister, Peter Garrett, was quoted in another newspaper article (SMH) declaring that the nation had moved on from debates about funding private

schools, beyond "those stale old ideological warfare exercises." A little research on what actually happens in Australian schools, how much we have to value in our mixed system compared with other countries would allow us to have a more mature debate on education funding, to focus on genuine substance, on the many things we are doing right, so that we can direct funding constructively to those areas that need attention.

This is what we should be able to look to think tanks for, to raise the standard of public debate by offering critical analysis of important issues, to depoliticise sensitive issues such as school funding, and not to waste energy fighting yesterday's ideological and sectarian battles.

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