

Gillard and My School

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There have been some remarkable adjustments in Australian political landscapes lately. The party of market based solutions changed leaders last December over its instant enthusiasm for regulating carbon emissions; while the Labour Party insists private enterprise is the road to the right result. More recently Labour, which has traditionally been the champion of education as social investment and a supporter of teaching principles, has embraced comparative schools evaluation and online publishing of alleged performance criteria.

“In no way whatever will this become a system of league tables”, said education minister, Julia Gillard, when this scheme was first proposed. On day one of the system, of course, the Sydney Morning Herald published the inevitable front page lead highlighting its “league tables” and inviting readers to evaluate their school’s position. No surprises there.

The Rudd Labour government was quick to promise (like Tony Blair’s in the UK) that every child would soon have a computer and that all would then be well again in schools. But the idea that the internet can ever be a basis for holistic teaching is nonsense. Extending it as a platform for parental decision-making is a new folly. “Australian parents want to know what’s going on in schools” said Gillard on ABC TV’s *Insiders* (April 11 2010), tritely adding that the sheer number of visits to the ‘my school’ website proved the government was right all along.

Well, no actually. Certainly, there’s a conversation to be had about teaching standards. Many teachers, suffering in an environment that’s become unacceptably stressful from the endless encroachments of non-educationists like professional politicians, committee-loving bureaucrats and quality assurance nazis, are probably *not* performing as they’d wish. Some – though the statistics suggest very few – may simply be lazy. It’s unlikely that the journalissimos writing about these lazy, under-worked teachers enjoying months of paid holidays ever really understood the teacher’s lot. It wasn’t true then and it’s not true now though the well-worn cliché, when it re-emerges, is never refuted by politicians. It’s revealing, moreover, that Gillard initially said her ‘education revolution’ was not about identifying errant teachers but is now not bothering to deny this useful side effect. Socio-economic variables alone ensure it can’t achieve that but it may, of course, secure useful political support as the debate heats up.

Although education philosophy has sometimes been obscured by ideology, especially in NSW, teachers have a real argument when they point to the conflict between teaching principles and the damage done to them by politicians ignorant of education values. As if to prove the point, Gillard’s answer to an ABC question on this subject was her dismissive little laugh and a repeat of the mantra about website visits.

The internet generation (and therefore, one supposes, many parents) has an unhealthy trust in anything prefaced with ‘e’, ‘i’ or ‘my’ and the appeal of a site called ‘my school’ is not surprising. But is it good policy? Gillard’s emphasis on site hits and teacher performance completely ignores the crucial centre ground of quality and objectives. It undermines an essential debate with the specious belief that opportunity and achievement can be quantified, and therefore ranked. No doubt some parents will take

away a comfortable sense of ownership from this trendy new e-space but it's an illusion. They're being conned. It hasn't worked in Europe or America, where teaching professionals consistently warn that something as precious as education must never be subject to hierarchy.

If Gillard's philosophy is allowed to prevail, politics being what it is, the inevitable reversal won't occur for at least a generation. Who knows what damage might be done in that time? It was the progressive left, let's not forget, which initially promoted a departure from structured grammar and which is now quietly re-inventing its position to discover the importance of things like verbs, sentence construction and punctuation. Look at a Facebook comment page if you want to see the damage language has sustained in the interim.