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HOW POWERFUL PEOPLE KEPT BOYS' EDUCATION OFF THE AGENDA: A WARNING FOR PARENTS AND THE PUBLIC

PETER WEST*

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INTRODUCTION

Boys underachieve at school. That statement is now so clearly understood that it is a cliché. Numerous studies have pointed out the under-achievement of boys in schools relative to girls across the western world, especially in areas related to verbal fluency and literacy (see Rowe and Rowe, 1999, Rowe and Rowe, 2000; McGaw, 1996; West,1999). Further, Kraemer talks of a lack of emotional vocabulary in males, which he terms alexythymia (Kraemer 2000). This is a key weakness in schools, which continually want males to describe *what they think* and *how they feel* in English compositions. Even science has become increasingly verbal and prone to questions beginning "discuss" or "explain". Problems of boys' underachievement have by now been discussed in literature across the western world, and policies to redress that issue are now common.

This piece tries to explain how boys came to be on political agendas by setting out some key developments in girls and boys education in the last twelve years through a theoretical framework of educational politics and policymaking. It also asks why it took so long for boys' education to break through from being perceived as an educational issue to becoming educational policy. Some discussion is made on the ideology behind policies on to encourage girls and boys. The focus is on Australia, particularly New South Wales. The article ends by reflecting on some important issues remaining, and a comment on the roles of experts.

STAGES IN THE POLICY PROCESS

Educational policymaking, West argued (1988:165) was similar to other fields of policy making. Inertia often overcomes the best intentions of governments who see themselves as reformers. And in the main, education is like other fields governed by political "laws" such as Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" which states that decisions are always made by a few.

Harman (1985:25) saw basically five stages in the policy-making process:

1. issue emergence and problem identification;
2. policy formulation and authorisation;
3. policy implementation;
4. policy evaluation or review; and
5. policy termination or succession.

These could be debated, but in any case they are not meant to be seen as distinct steps. Sometimes policies are added to in a way that virtually challenges the whole idea behind the original policy. This brings us to our present case.

In this article, the inclusion of boys in what was seen as gender or girls' education is viewed as a case study in educational politics and policy. Hofferbert defined a case study as an in-depth examination of an example of behaviour which enriched an understanding of general movements or patterns in society (1974:89). He warned that for them to be useful, such examples must be reasonably typical, rather than aberrant examples. Case studies could offer rich detail and illuminate the dynamics of policymaking. But care should be taken, he said, in deciding whether such a case illustrated general tendencies (1974:139). For these reasons, the events described have been examined to see if they fit a larger pattern of other educational policymaking, especially in New South Wales.

EXPERTS AND THE PUBLIC

Experts often see things differently from the man or woman in the street. The gulf between politicians and educational experts or professionals has been noted by a number of writers. Halperin saw the gulf as "a kind of professional Mason-Dixon line" (1974:189, whereas Halperin used the term "a great divide" (cited in Mosher and Wagoner 1978:252). Further, Iannacone and Lutz write of the politics of education as "a politics of the sacred rather than the hustings" (cited in Iannacone 1981:25). They suggest that too often, academics see themselves set apart, almost as a holy priesthood who are above suspicion or reproach. They suggest that educators often get out of phase with the political world; what is considered as truth in universities or schools is not always held to be true in the outside world. When this happens, politicians often act to pull the experts and/ or educational systems into line. (Iannacone 1967:32).

IS THERE A PROBLEM WITH BOYS AND SCHOOLING?

Do all boys underachieve? One way of putting it might be that being a boy, with all its attendant qualities of noisiness, risk and adventure, does not typically mesh very well with what teachers expect of children who are in classrooms. (West, 1996b; Kraemer, 2000). Of course, some groups of boys – perhaps from Asian cultures more than non-Asian- do achieve well at school.

Despite these marked differences between groups of boys, *the evidence indicating that boys, on average, achieve at significantly lower levels than girls on ALL areas of the assessed cognitive curriculum throughout their primary and secondary schooling is not in dispute* (Rowe,2000:2).

This evidence indicates that boys are more disengaged from school, subject to more disciplinary actions, more likely to drop out of school prematurely and are more commonly identified as at-risk of poor achievement in literacy (Rowe, 2000:3). The emphasis on *assessed curriculum* in Rowe's

comment is worth noting: in the last twenty years, changes in assessment seem to have made school more verbal and thus more favourable to girls (West,2002).

An important gulf has occurred between medical literature on gender and the sociology and education literature. Boys are not all the same. Yet sociologists and educational experts seem determined to gloss over boys' similarities in favour of emphasising how gender is constructed by males and females. Most commentators on gender surveyed by Martin for the ACT report on boys' education (Martin 2002) said that boys were not even similar to each other. Yet research consistently registers differences between males and females in body size, rates of growth, times of growth and maturation, and brain differences. Barron-Cohen's work at Cambridge explores some differences between males and females without lapsing into essentialising gender differences (2004). It is important to understand also the literature on young males' specific health problems summed up by Kraemer (2000) and Mathers (1995). The medical literature, then, highlights some of the 'clear biological causes for some of the major differentials between boys and girls' (Mathers 1995:17) (emphasis added).

We registered earlier that on average, males have lower levels of literacy. Why is literacy so important? A poor rate of literacy, going as it very likely does with low confidence in reading, discourages a person from taking part in many public discussions. Failure to succeed as an educated person might not shut a person out of a trade- possibly a lucrative one. But it makes it difficult for a person to live a satisfying inner life and makes it harder for him or her to identify and ward off depression. The importance of reading for a person's harmonious inner life is emphasised by Dowrick (1991), Teese, Davies, Charlton and Polesel (1995:109) and West (1996a). For these reasons, governments are concerned about children who are disengaged – not just from schools, but from the process of education *per se*. This might include education from preschool up to university, technical education (unless this is held to mean only the most narrowly technical) public libraries, coffee shop discussions, taking an active part in newspapers and all the things that make up an informed citizenry. People who were disengaged as school pupils are at risk of becoming effective aliens within their own state. Concern for the social consequences of boys' underachievement could well have included fears that boys were not learning to be good citizens; indeed, males are ninety per cent of those kept in Australian prisons. Health statistics show that males stand out in youth suicide and road deaths and accidents (NSW Health, 1999; Mathers, 1995:17). Thus far, improving educational chances for boys might seem to have been something which governments might act urgently upon. But the road to policy change was to be a complex one, as analysis will show.

GIRLS' EDUCATION AS POLICY

Australia is a Federal system, with a national government based in Canberra and State governments based in the State capitals such as Sydney and Melbourne. Responsibility for education rests mainly with the States. But our story begins with Australia-wide developments. After many years of Liberal

Governments (1949 to 1972) the Liberals lost direction and impetus. Gough Whitlam's Labor Government came to power in December, 1972 with a large reform agenda including changing policy on women, and a wholesale review of what was done in education. These coalesced in part with an impetus to improve educational chances for girls. The Karmel Report on education which reported to the Whitlam Government in 1973 had declared that 'Being a girl is an educational disadvantage except when it is associated with high socioeconomic status' (cited in Taylor *et al.*, 1997: 140). Strategies to widen educational opportunities for girls began thereafter (as they did in most western countries) in the mid-1970s and 1980s, and a National Action Plan for the Education of Girls was put in place. It is not possible here to set out that policy process in detail; for a brief coverage of some of the issues, see Taylor *et al.*, 1997: 140ff. The girls' education policy (more accurately, policies) was or were authorised by successive Federal and State Governments with the participation of key actors at State and Federal level. These notably included teacher unions, private and State schools' principals and administrators, and parents' spokesmen. They were supported by feminists' spokespersons and media commentary. There seems to have been very widespread acceptance of the need for the policy, with little stated disagreement, if any. Thus by the early 1990s girls' strategies was well established policy. Some might have seen the policies as finalised; but policies are rarely final. They are always subject to changes in thinking by policymakers and public opinion.

HOW FEMINISM WAS LINKED WITH GIRLS' EDUCATION

Girls' strategies were introduced based on a definite ideology. This is explained by Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard, and Henry:

Several feminist policy analysts (Kenway 1990, Yates 1993) have indicated that the dominant ideology informing the policy is liberal feminism, indicated by the way the approach focusses on girls gaining access to existing educational structures rather than a commitment to more radical change. Other feminist discourses exist in the policy and sit in a contradictory relationship to the dominant liberal feminist ideology. For example, the influence of socialist feminism is apparent in the recognition for the first time in educational policy that girls are not a homogeneous group....Radical feminist discourses are also reflected in the policy, for example in the concerns with sexuality and sexual harassment, and in the affirmation of female culture and experiences and a critical view of the education of boys (Kenway 1990:68).

(Emphasis added) Taylor et al, 1997: 140)

Thus, girls' education rested on feminist ideology of various kinds, whether "socialist feminist", "liberal feminist" or "radical feminist". But already in the quotation above there were signs that talking about one sex was going to involve talking about the other. If "affirmation of female culture and experiences" was good for girls, would not equivalent affirmation be good for boys? Implicit in a published, authorised policy on one sex (girls) was some kind of policy on the other (boys).

Academics now began to move further – or ahead of? – public opinion. In the Australian community by the mid-1990s there were very few people who would *publicly* speak against, or question, feminism. (But privately, many did have doubts especially about some of the more outspoken feminists. (This has been discussed fairly widely in the literature on Australian men, for instance in West, 1996a). An important linkage had been made between progressive thinking and the idea that educational institutions would give special assistance to girls. As we saw, feminists wrote, discussed and defended education of girls. But what did parents think about feminist discourses in the school, whether radical or liberal feminist? Although these shades of feminism were probably accepted very widely in academia, they were more controversial in the wider community. Hogan and West warn that controversial issues are rarely solved; they are given interim solutions (1980:90). And reliance on rhetoric by one group leaves it vulnerable to counter-attack by groups who turn the rhetoric around (1980:81).

BOYS' NEEDS ON THE AGENDA

We need now to turn to the call for boys' education and understand its sources. A debate on boys' education began in many countries in the western world in the early 1990s. This was probably part of a wider debate about the position of the sexes that occurred in the aftermath of feminism. Discussion began in Australia in or about 1990 with examination of men's lives and reflection on the implications for educating and raising boys (West, 1990). Commentators such as Richard Fletcher and the present writer asked what was being done to assist boys who were being suspended in large numbers, expelled from school and subject to high rates of suicide.

The media encouraged the debate, first as a novelty, for discussion about men as *men* seems not to have occurred before. Later it often framed the discourse (following Macnamara, 1995) as a "gender war" between the sexes (Arndt, 1994).

The issue might have been seen as a request that schools assist boys. But there was far more to it than that. It was not a single issue at all. It was really a bundle of issues which concerned policymakers (OECD, 2001). Issues which come onto the policy agenda do usually come in a bundle (Hogan and West 1980:3; West, 1988). In the case of boys' education, such issues might have included some or most of the following: high rates of suicide among males aged 16 to 25, high rates of motor accident among young males, "gangs" of boys in trouble on the street, high rates of suspension among boys, and boys' perceived low rates of school leaving exam success relative to girls.

When the media explained these issues, subtlety often went out the window. An issue does not exist as a fixed entity, but is framed by journalists as they see it. This would rarely agree with the way that professional educators see the issue. Moreover, journalists commonly take on a devil's advocate role

or set up adversaries of some kind (Macnamara, 1996: 16-17). Feminists versus parents; fathers versus mothers; parents versus bureaucrats; these seem to have been some of the ways in which the issue was framed. But the media treatment of boys' educational needs was not uniformly silly, as some academics said (University of Western Sydney, 2003). One worthwhile example was *The Economist's* study in 1996 which linked a decline in work available to working-class males with boys' difficulties in school, connecting developments in the UK, western Europe, Australia and the USA.

The discussion about improving boys' education took place first of all in the daily newspapers, which began to use spokesmen for men or boys to set against well-established feminists and spokespersons for girls (Zuel, 1993); West, 1994). It took place at informal meetings, teacher conferences and workshops, and in parents' magazines. However, the boys' advocates did not necessarily agree with the views imputed to them by journalists concocting a 'hot issue'.

One commentator is worth discussing individually. By the early 1990s, Steve Biddulph was well known as a spokesperson for men's health, boys' education and other issues which for convenience we could term 'men's issues'. He appeared from a counselling background, was not a member of any teachers' union and owed no loyalty to existing educational organisations. He used various community networks to speak to crowded halls all over Australia and beyond. Biddulph's *Manhood* appeared in 1994 and became a best-seller. His next book, *Raising Boys* was also on best-seller lists week after week in Australia and was subsequently selling well in the UK and the USA, among other countries. Biddulph deftly linked issues which he called father-hunger, boys' need for authoritative parenting and boys' underachievement in school. Such a book was bought and presumably read by a wide spectrum of parents. It was carefully sympathetic to mothers and female teachers. However, it questioned where men stood in relation to feminism, expressing the need for men's liberation and suggesting that all men were part of the men's movement (1995:240). It emphatically urged specific programs to affirm boys, run by male-affirming male and female teachers. These should accompany existing programs to support girls (1995:148).

Thus as the issue or issues developed, it changed; boys' perceived lack of success in examinations relative to girls seems to have gained more prominence. Educational issues do change as they emerge and are articulated, according to Hogan and West (1980:82).

THE ROLE OF THE EXPERTS CHALLENGED

Thus the gap between the educational experts and the public discussion led by the new experts grew wider. While the educational establishment was still talking about girls' education, the media was talking about boys' needs. At some of the educational conferences, attempts to raise boys' needs were met with anger and hostility. The boys' issue threatened the authority of established spokespeople on gender. Some of the educational actors, notably the New South Wales Teachers' Federation, had spokespersons or 'gender experts' who were adamantly opposed to change in

established policies in this area. There were also 'gender' spokesmen in the Department of Education. These people were allowed and encouraged to speak for these organisations on matters of 'gender'. But by the mid-1990s their position was under challenge.

Simon says that when issues become controversial, experts lose their power. There become experts for a policy, and experts against it (cited in Hogwood and Gunn, 1986:266). Or as Pope wrote,

Who shall decide, when doctors disagree?

The 'gender spokespersons' tended to be activists in union politics and identified girls' education as something which must not be tampered with. The Teachers' Federation organised study days in which experts were brought in to denounce boys' education strategies as reactionary or anti-feminist: its journal, *Education*, chronicled the days' activities and lauded the work of girls' activists. It was easy for these experts to deride some of the sillier discussions of 'gender wars' in the media (Arndt, 1994) and say that these arguments were simplistic and unworthy of serious consideration. This is a philosophical technique known as knocking down a straw man: by ridiculing the silliest version of an argument, a person attempts to demolish the whole argument. It has also been suggested that some of those who set up girls' education policies in the 1970s were now in positions of power in educational bureaucracies and the unions. Naturally they fought against any watering down of 'their' reforms (private conversation with educational bureaucrats). The educational hierarchy, or holy priesthood as Iannacone terms them, had been challenged, but were holding the issue at bay.

ACADEMICS REACT TO THE CALL FOR CHANGE

Academics, too had much to lose in the debate, for many were established as legitimate spokespersons on 'gender'. Moreover, girls' education was part of a bundle of progressive ideas in education – along with assistance to indigenous people and working-class students. We had noted earlier that the Karmel Report had said that girls were disadvantaged- apart from those from high socioeconomic classes. But arguing that boys needed assistance threatened the disadvantaged status of girls as a class. Perhaps boys, too, were disadvantaged? The Teese Report said that they were:

Boys, too, are disadvantaged. Their school careers, on the whole, seem to be less successful, to terminate earlier, to be characterized by failure at an earlier point in time, and to be more frequently accompanied by motivational and behavioural problems... Boys are less well integrated, they are typically less positive about school, and have a narrower view of what school should be about. Where they can avoid doing English, they often do, and where they can't, they often fail. (1995:108-9).

The authors went on to talk in detail of working class boys' difficulties in English and the consequences for men's interior life and communication with others. It was a sophisticated and complex argument. What was significant was that the word 'disadvantage' had been used authoritatively about boys in an academic report.

But coverage of the call for boys' strategies was given much more one-sided treatment by many academics and academic texts. For some academics, the call for boys' education strategies was easy to caricature as an angry backlash against feminism (Taylor *et al.*, 1997:51). Others said boys' strategies were being advocated by an unholy alliance between the media and an undefined men's movement (Mills and Lingard, 1997). Another source had a rather inaccurate description of the call for boys' strategies:

At this time policies for the education of girls were increasingly being questioned in the media in the light of the 'What about the boys?' debates, which argued that policies for the education of girls had 'gone too far' and policies focussing on boys were now needed (Taylor et al, 1977:51).

A grammar check will reveal that this sentence does not make grammatical sense. It should further be noted that the supposed quotations within this statement are not attributed to any source. There is no evidence presented about *who* asked 'What about the boys?'; although asking this question, one assumes, must be a bad thing. There is no evidence brought forward that any reputable person ever said that policies for the education of girls had 'gone too far'. In sum, this is a defence of a political position on ideological grounds. It does not stand up to scrutiny, and is academically questionable.

An ideological pattern of attack on boys' strategies frequently emerged in academic commentaries on boys' strategies. The 'straw man' technique described earlier was used again as a simplified view of the call for boys' strategies was offered. Rarely, if ever, were boys' advocates actually quoted or even mentioned. They were given no room to defend themselves or put forward an argument. Instead, they were presented as anti-progressive troglodytes; or it was suggested that the media had blown ideas about boys' difficulties out of all proportion. There was usually little or no evidence presented of the boys' advocates' alleged reactionary tendencies. Feminist critiques of those arguments were then set out at length. Bibliographies omitted any reference to the works or ideas of boys' advocates, but presented full lists of their opponents' writings. Brady and Kennedy, for instance, do all of this in a chapter on diversity and equity. Whether the cause of equity could be defended by only assisting girls was by now at least open to question in view of the evidence about boys' school outcomes. These included suspensions and expulsions, not simply school-leaving scores, as noted by Teese *et al.*, and others. Were working-class boys more advantaged than middle-class girls? If public resources were spent assisting girls in Mathematics, why not assist boys in the key subject of English?. The Brady and Kennedy chapter ends by presenting at length the speech of a male feminist, which concludes:

We need a theory of masculinity that speaks to men's experience of themselves, while enabling them to honestly acknowledge their complicity in the collective structures of dominant masculinity and gender injustice....It means getting boys to recognise the abuse of power which characterises masculine culture (Brady and Kennedy, 2003:39-40).

What does this mean? It sounds too much like getting teachers to try to stop boys from being men in any meaningful sense of the word. One doubts that this is physically possible; human nature tells us that boys do become men of various kinds. And so the chapter tries to defuse the arguments for boys' strategies, devalue their presenters and suggest that there are no simple answers. This carefully avoids answering the questions which boys' advocates had raised in the media and elsewhere.

In sum, established interests were trying to kill off the issue by whatever means they could. The whole recalled the arguments of Marx and Lenin who would present the views of Comrade X or Y in savagely ironical terms, and then dismiss them as fundamentally flawed, incorrect and an insult to the proletariat. A detailed exposition of the correct way of seeing things would then follow. In this sense, the arguments about boys' education were highly ideological. Subverting Iannacone's words somewhat, girls' education had become sacred in the educational citadel and it was heresy even to ask whether boys' strategies should be added to them. But governments do listen to populist arguments and frequently act on them in order to preserve their hold on power.

Hogan and West suggest that key actors in the educational process have veto power, and that the Teachers' Federation can veto policies it does not approve of (1980:53). Spokesmen in the teacher unions in Australia (and possibly other countries) were adamantly opposed to anything being done for boys, for in their eyes anything of that nature would automatically disadvantage girls. Indeed, the phrase constantly used was the question of assisting boys 'without doing anything to hold back the achievement of girls'. But what was decided in the closeted surroundings of a union's leadership - one recalls Iannacone's notions of a sacred priesthood unused to open critique of its thinking - was not always agreed to by a wider public. Public opinion shifts, probably more swiftly than the thinking in unions and boardrooms (Bennett, 1992:25).

THE FLAVOUR OF POLICYMAKING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

We noted earlier that under the Australian Constitution, education is left for the States. However, since World War II [and still more since State Aid for Catholic schools was begun by the Federal Government in 1963] a Commonwealth presence in education has been very pronounced. Thus it was unclear whether boys' strategies might be enacted at State level or Federal (national) level.

New South Wales is the most populous of the Australian States, and its political culture has been characterised by rough-house politics and public brawling (West, 1991:54). The sheer size of a

system of schools stretching from Sydney west to Broken Hill and beyond makes it liable to capture by 'interests' or key educational actors. It is not possible to involve all those who are going to be affected by a decision in the decision-making process. Thus an *educational power group*, somewhat akin to a board of directors, typically controls much of the agenda in State decision-making in New South Wales, more so than in smaller States where lower numbers make decision-making more informal. (Hogan and West, 1980: 97; West, 1991). That power group usually includes the Minister for Education, the Director-General of Education, the leadership of the Teachers' Federation, and parents' representatives. On occasion, it includes other important policy actors such as the university leaders or academics, and employers' spokesmen. The secretary of the New South Wales Parents' and Citizens' Associations called publicly for boys' strategies in April, 1993. But this was just one voice in the educational power group at State level.

THE STATE VERSUS PRIVATE ASPECT

We have not yet looked at the public/private aspect of the developments in 'gender'. One of the oldest tensions in Australian education is that between church schools, on one hand, and those administered by State governments on the other. (Mitchell, 1975; Harman and Selby Smith, 1976). Perhaps inevitably, private and State schools look for a competitive edge with clients- including the parents of boys. Private schools were already holding seminars to discuss ways to assist boys in the late 1990s and were well on their way towards formulating strategies by 1998 (Improving Outcomes in Boys' Education, 1998). By the year 2000, many private schools were engaging consultants and holding conferences to determine what should be done to improve boys' achievement (for some outcomes see West, 2001 and Boys' Education Conference, 2002). This raised in a new way the old question of how government schools could compete with private schools for a valued well-educated and discriminating clientele. For it was clear that government schools were hampered by fear of incurring the wrath of influential people, *inter alia*, in teacher and academic unions. Boyd argued that an egalitarian-based system could not compete successfully against an elite one (1986:11). One fact was inescapable: roughly half of the total school population were boys; and virtually every boy had parents or guardians who voted.

MAKING A START

Thus far, boys' strategies had made it onto the *public agenda*, as Cobb and Elder call it (1972:2). They were being debated. They had yet to make it onto the *institutional agenda*, the list of matters selected for government action (1972:2). The key questions were: what were governments prepared to do about the issue of boys' underachievement? And how could they shift the debate along, when the established experts had refused to countenance populist calls for better education for boys? In the case of a contentious issue, the proven instrument in many States of Australia and the Federal Government has always been some kind of *ad hoc* or Parliamentary Committee (Hogan and West, 1980). This was indeed the chosen instrument for weighing up a possible new direction. A committee

of the NSW Parliament was formed in 1994 under backbencher Stephen O'Doherty and reported towards the end of that year. Significantly, it contained only government backbenchers from the Liberal-National coalition in power at the time. It concluded that boys were at risk in many aspects of their schooling and recommended that action begin to address these problems. But the State Government changed hands shortly thereafter; Bob Carr formed a Government by a narrow majority and O'Doherty became Shadow Education Minister for New South Wales. All Governments in New South Wales work to defuse hostility between themselves and the well-resourced Teachers' Federation which had opposed boys' strategies (Hogan and West, 1980). Consequently nothing was done by a cautious government and a timid Minister to implement the O'Doherty Report, though a new Gender Strategy purportedly addressed the issue of boys' difficulties, as well as girls'. When parents and school principals asked educational administrators about boys' educational needs, they were dismissed with brusque statements- "we've fixed all that". Again, boys' strategies had seemingly been pushed off the institutional policy agenda. The issue was too difficult to cope with; possibly the Carr Government seemed to think it not worth incurring the ire of the teachers' union. At the height of the impasse, one commentator wickedly suggested that if parents wanted their boys to succeed in school, they should send them to school in a dress (UNSW, 1996).

POLICY BREAKTHROUGH

By the late 1990s, the Federal Liberal-National Party coalition government of John Howard was showing interest in boys' education. Backbenchers such as Kerry Bartlett, then a new MP from the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney had followed the debate keenly. Philosophically, the Howard Government was finding rewards in identifying itself with ordinary Australians, and in doing so took many formerly safe seats from Labor throughout the period 1993-2004, most notably in Western Sydney, once safe for Labor. The government was also far from sympathetic to the left-leaning leaders of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation. Seizing the initiative on such a popular issue, and denying the Federation's executive its wishes, might have been itself a cause for action.

Accordingly, the Howard Government accepted the challenge and referred boys' education to a House of Representatives Committee in May, 2000. Unlike the O'Doherty Committee, this had representatives from all the major parties and this increased its chances of success. Submissions were taken across Australia and forums were held to assist the government to take soundings from academics, parents, boys and girls and many other contributors to the debate. There was a necessary delay because of a national election [as a parliamentary committee was technically created by the Parliament, it had to be disbanded while the Parliament was in process of re-election]. But the Committee was reconstituted after the Howard Government was re-elected, and it reported in October, 2002. It unanimously recommended that governments begin programs to assist boys, especially in literacy. The ensuing Report, was called *Boys: Getting it Right*. The Report was supported by the Labor Opposition and met widespread public acclamation, with only a few

disgruntled complaints heard in academic quarters (one commentator said that the Report should not be called *Getting it Right*, but *Getting it Wrong*.)

The Minister of Education, Training and Youth Affairs was now Dr Brendan Nelson. He announced a Boys' Lighthouse Program to fund schools doing useful projects with boys and to assist them to teach other teachers to educate boys more effectively. At the time of writing, the Boys' Education Lighthouse Schools' Program is continuing with pilot projects and back-up research on how to shift boys' achievement upward. Politically, governments could and did say that they were acting on public concern about boys. The media campaign of some twelve years abated, but did not disappear entirely.

HOW WAS A NEW CONSENSUS ACHIEVED?

The reader will recall the earlier discussion about ideology and the fact that feminism was – to an extent – controversial. It is worthwhile taking a cool look at how agreement on such an issue on boys' education was finally engineered after so many years of failure. A consensus had been achieved, though some of those on the fringes were still unhappy. On one hand, there were groups which had always wanted to deny that boys had a problem at all; or argued that failure would be somehow good for boys in the long run (*Sydney Morning Herald*, January 1995). On the other hand, some urged the need to reverse feminism, or 'go back to the way things were', perhaps in the 1950s. Many of these groups appeared in an open forum organised by the Committee's secretariat and Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs in Melbourne in November, 2002. The spread of ideas was wide. But because of the large degree of unity among the political parties and the thoughtful way in which consensus was sought, the Report sought the middle ground and knitted together agreement on what should be done for boys without disadvantaging girls

ISSUES REMAINING

At the time of writing, boys' education has moved from an issue on the fringe of the policy agenda to one which sits comfortably in the middle. The Federal Government has set up Lighthouse Schools and announced a ten-point program on which schools ought to move forward to increase boys' achievement (*Meeting the Challenge*, 2003). Thus, by means of the familiar and reliable committee method, a new consensus in educational policy-making has been achieved. This is consistent with the general pattern of educational policymaking described in Hogan and West (1980) and indeed other policy fields (Bennett, 1992:81). Thus boys' education appears to be a reasonably typical case study and part of a general pattern, as mentioned by Hofferbert above. In the way established experts were 'rolled' in the end by populist arguments, there are also some similarities with the 'back to basics' campaigns in the States of New South Wales and Queensland discussed in Hogan and West (1980:97ff) and Scott and Scott (1980). A new issue challenges the existing consensus. If its support is strong enough, it is accommodated by the existing processes, or through an *ad hoc* or standing committee.

Premier Bob Carr, the so-called Education Premier, had not been able to act on behalf of the boys in his State. Perhaps paradoxically, the traditional-values philosophy of the Howard Government nationally was more sympathetic to change than the allegedly more radical New South Wales Labour Government of Bob Carr, though Hogan and West see New South Wales Labor as deeply conservative in its approach to new policies (1980). (See also Hogan's discussion of the conservative 'Sydney style' (1979). Significantly, Mitchell sees the teachers' union in New South Wales as politically radical but resistant to educational change (1975:212). Popular calls for change in the teaching of 'gender' –especially, but not only, in the media - threatened the expert consensus that was in reality conservative, or governed at times by inertia. The education policy process is a continuous unfolding of tensions and stresses. As often happens at the supposed end of the process, some issues remain unresolved.

First, policymakers are undecided about how to single out the boys who need most attention. Recent research commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training has marked out indigenous males, rural and isolated males as most needing to be understood. Yet Rowe's comments earlier that boys' average school performance is significantly lower than girls suggests that there may be a wider problem - possibly with most boys, apart from the top ten or fifteen percent of high achievers. Arguments about 'which boys' need assistance is proving to be a difficult question to answer, though it does not trouble the elite schools, which set their sights on improving outcomes of all their male pupils (West, 2001). Pinpointing those who most need assistance, and making sure that policy addresses those most in need, is not a new problem for policymakers. Boys' education happens to be a particularly tricky case, involving as it does tensions between the sexes and very significant changes made in the dynamic balance between the sexes in Australian society since the 1970s (West, 1996a).

Second, although academics and educators pride themselves on their knowledge of education, they have their own interests to protect. In keeping policy on 'gender' as it was, academics were protecting their own interests. Not for the first time, academics and educators were all thinking in similar ways. Having people such as Biddulph question this by-now established thinking was virtually a form of heresy. It was almost as if policy on 'gender' was not to be questioned. Those who did question it were treated with scorn and derision.

Third, the Federal Government's actions on boys' education left the State Government floundering. Reports appeared in 2005 of a document on boys' education that had been prepared by the State Department of Education in 2002 but was never released. The document was called *Boys Can Do Anything*. This might have been a title that some of the powerful actors in New South Wales education might have objected to. One assumes that attempting to set out any policy on what to do with boys was still too difficult or controversial, and that Ministers or their advisers had been nervous of a public reaction of some kind. Announcement that this document had been "locked in a box" in

the State Department of Education (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 May 2005) would have done nothing to give parents confidence in NSW State schools. It is possibly one of the reasons why middle class parents have been drifting to private schools.

Finally, much research and writing has been done, especially in the UK, about the gender gap between girls' school achievement and the lower school achievement of boys. As we saw in this article, educational experts expressed much anxiety about assisting boys 'without doing anything to hold back the achievement of girls'. Fears that boys' school achievement will eclipse girls' seem far from being realised, in the UK, at least. The Raising Boys Achievement project at Cambridge found it difficult to identify more than a handful of schools in which boys consistently outperformed girls (Younger and Warrington, 2003 :1). The population studied apparently ranged very far from the researchers' base at the University of Cambridge in central England. A gender gap between girls and boys' school achievement may be a fact of the educational landscape for a very long time. Whether boys achieve more in their lifecourse than girls is naturally another matter altogether.

The above analysis has some warnings for the experts. Iannacone's depiction of the education experts is rich in irony: 'the politics of the priesthood are shrouded in mystery'. It is too easy for someone who works in an educational field to feel that he or she has done the research and has the answer to any given problem. Iannacone suggests that the comfort of academia- even in these lean times – shelters one from the turbulent world of the media and from the harsh light of daily politics. It is understandable that educators develop their own ideology which may be supported by many of their colleagues. But unless we live in a totalitarian state, the same ideology will, and should, be questioned by the media. The medieval church burned heretics and forbade scientists to say that the earth revolved around the sun. In today's universities, heretics are not burnt, but 'incorrect' ideas are still ridiculed in sociology and education.

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