

**Class Wars. Money, Schools and Power in Modern Australia**By *Tony Taylor**Monash University Publishing*

Clayton

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The funding of schools in Australia has been a divisive issue since colonial times. Woven into church–state relations, it was not resolved by the free, compulsory and secular Acts (1872–1895). When Australian lawmakers organized elementary schooling through the machinery of State and terminated aid to private bodies, Catholic authorities built their own systems of parochial schools, staffed by teaching congregations. But after the Second World War, when demand for secondary education rose rapidly, the bishops found that they could not make universal provision of education at this level (or indeed maintain primary schools of adequate quality). They campaigned vigorously against the perceived inequitable funding arrangements – as they had done in the inter-war – and won over state and federal politicians. Taylor’s *Class Wars* is in part this story of an ascendant Catholic Church securing the return of State Aid by keeping conservative parties in power. In doing so, the bishops cleared the way for aid to independent non-Catholic schools. Cherished by the Liberal and the-then Country Party, these schools, some of which were elite establishments, could not be safely funded without the political cover of social justice to Catholic schools and indeed without some federal aid to public schools.

Taylor does not discuss the trend to financial extinction that the private schools were experiencing in the 1950s and 1960s. But it would have strengthened his argument had he done so. They were caught between unviability and the evils of funding the Catholic faith, and had yet to fashion their democratic narrative. They were a prized institution through which the upper middle classes of Australian society assured cultural cohesion and economic dominance as captured in contemporary Australian sociology, e.g., Encel’s *Equality and Authority*, 1970. (Curiously much of the research literature on Australian schooling goes unnoticed in this book). The revival of the independent school checked the threat posed by secondary education for all, whose rise alarmed conservative thinkers such as Leonie Kramer and weakened the hold of socially advantaged families on academic schooling. Under Prime Minister Howard, the return to growth of private schooling not only saved the older establishments, but multiplied newer, if less academically prestigious schools. Taylor shows in his study of Minister Kemp that this was intended to widen the electoral base of the Coalition. The fall of Howard promised a return to needs-based funding, looking back to the Whitlam Labor Government and the Karmel Report (1973) which had accommodated Catholic demands, though not the elite Protestant establishments. In a detailed, forensic examination, Taylor shows how the Gonski reform led by Prime Minister Gillard was badly managed at a political level, leading to a proliferation of bilateral agreements and concessions which sent the reform into limbo. The Australian Labor Party (ALP) does not come out too well in this account. But neither of the major parties does. It is as if the rows between them were inconsequential and the question is why they took so long to achieve so little.

Tony Taylor is at his best in writing about these later decades – no mean achievement, given the complexity of the issues and the rapid turnover of politicians. The earlier decades find the author perhaps less confident and more formal, with the work mainly divided into successive ministries in the style of private school histories which

allocate chapters to successive heads. This is symptomatic of a bigger weakness. Needed in a book on *Class Wars* was more discussion of the evolving context of Australian society and economy. This includes the accelerating importance of school. In the late 1940s, only about one in ten young people finished school. Increasing sevenfold by the turn of the new century, mass dependence of the population on schooling had arrived. But success at school has remained closely bound up with family SES and selective schooling (both public and private) and it is doubtful whether the funding wars can be separated from the achievement wars.

Social conflict tends to be overshadowed in Taylor's book. *Class Wars* privileges the ideas and behavior of politicians and neglects the stresses and strains of the population. An injection of economic history would have shown the tensions to which Australians were exposed by structural change and the need to manage this through schools unhelpfully bolted onto the past. A cultural history would have seen in the slow response of schools their ability to manage change, if not on their own terms, then on behalf of the universities (ever their masters). A social history would have observed the shrinking size of families, their ever-greater concentration in cities, the intensity of academic pressure on the individual child, and the multiplication of family strategies. *Class Wars* wins on the intricacies, the dialogue between and within party and the machinations of the media, but loses on the sociology of schooling. Politicians and media may lead, but demand for schooling is an economic and social phenomenon as are the ways families invest or fail to invest in their children and what they get or fail to get in return.

Likewise, the Catholic story favours the corporate, not the parents' view. Hidden are the many non-Catholic families using the church's schools and the gentrification of the Catholic population itself. Besides its own self-interest, for whom and for what was the hierarchy fighting for under its banner of social justice? But even the corporate view is treated rather lightly. No-one knows how Catholic systems reallocate government funds, but on this staunchly defended prerogative the long-term survival of the diocesan system depends.

Somewhat inaptly named, *Class Wars* remonstrates against the shallowness of political divisions, the flagrant bias of the Coalition, the always-fractious ALP, mind never made up, ever the master of ineffectual compromise and tergiversation. Unsurprising that 60 years of warfare has produced no resolution. But why, when a solution has been at hand since the invention of needs-based funding in the early 1970s has this been surrendered to the mediocrity and electoral venality of the major parties? That is indeed a question of social, not only political history.

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### **“The Right Thing to Read”: A History of Australian Girl-Readers, 1910–1960**

*By Bronwyn Lowe*

Routledge

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Australian historians have long struggled to locate the child's voice in the archives. Occasionally, they notice a fleeting impression in a handwritten letter, a scribble in the margin of an old book or a small rhyme in a recorded interview. More often, however,