

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 1019

The Privileged Few

Current funding of education institutions in Australia are producing a class ridden society, not even a meritocratic one. The generous over funding of a fee paying religious or denominational system alongside the underfunding of a public, free education system has produced a bunyip aristocracy in which the children of the wealthy feel entitled to first class tickets to both wealth and heaven, while the rest may go begging. They have taken very seriously the saying of Christ that '*the poor will always be with us.*'

In a recently published book *The Privileged Few*, Clive Hamilton and Myra Hamilton have this to say about the current situation:

As the prime mover of the machinery of privilege, exclusive private schools are the enemy of meritocracy. They induct their charges into a special club where they are 'consecrated' in the sense of being taught that they possess higher spiritual and moral qualities. The schools mobilise their histories, opulence, ornamentations, rituals, alumni and rhetoric to reinforce the symbolic power of being educated there. As a result, those who attend the most elite schools are regarded with a certain awe, even by cynical outsiders.

In practice, elite schools are sited for the transubstantiation of financial capital into social, cultural and symbolic capital. Social capital is built through the formation of networks, which help unify the ruling elite as well as providing graduates with access to privileges through life. The cultural capital acquired by students can be embodied in subtle forms of understanding, in postures and dispositions, and in a sense of ease and confidence in future success. Although elite schools project an image of superior moral quality, in practice they give rise to a sense of entitlement and

specialness among their students that sees many of them believing they are above society's norms and rules.

Elite schools today place great emphasis on making 'global citizens'. Programmes encouraging 'service', such as good works in the global South, are in practice more a form of self-advancement than a way of imbuing students with a sense of social justice. Scholarship programmes for lower-income students are used to conceal the inherent unfairness of their elitism. Indigenous scholarship students are exploited for their public relations value.

To defend themselves against accusation that they serve as the foremost vehicles for perpetuating inequality and privilege, elite schools adopt legitimisation strategies, including disavowal of their privilege and a discourse of victimhood. To obscure the advantages of class behind certificates of merit, they work hard to enhance their reputation for strong academic performance, co-opting the symbols of merit as they undermine meritocracy. In practice, their academic performance is not better than that of public schools, despite their extravagant resources and gaming of the system.

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