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BOYS' EDUCATION: WHY GOVERNMENTS DELAYED

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Since the 1980s the academic performance of boys at secondary school in Australia has (on average) been below that of girls. yet it was not until the late 1990s that this shortfall made it onto the agenda of educational decision makers. This article examines who was responsible for the delay and why, eventually, the education of boys is near the top of public concerns about educational outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

A number of studies have pointed out the under-achievement of boys in schools relative to girls across the western world, particularly in areas related to verbal fluency and literacy. Problems of boys' underachievement have been discussed in literature across the western world, and policies to redress that issue are now common.¹

The article attempts 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 asks why it took so long for boys' education to break through from being perceived as an educational issue to becoming educational policy. There is also discussion of the ideology behind policies on the education of 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, was similar to other fields of policy making.² The principle of legitimacy applies; for example: old-established institutions have more influence than newer institutions. Inertia often overcomes

the best intentions of governments who see themselves as reformers. And in the main, education, like other fields, is governed by political rules such as Michels' 'iron law of oligarchy' which states that decisions are always made by a few.

Harman 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.³

These stages could be debated, but in any case they are not meant to be seen as immutable or distinct steps. In particular, most policies are not evaluated in any real sense; they accumulate incrementally, like verdigris, until some new broom comes along to try to sort out the mess and the contradictions. 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.

EXPERTS AND THE PUBLIC

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',⁴ whereas Berdahl used the term 'a great divide'.⁵ Further,

Iannacone and Lutz write of the politics of education as ‘a politics of the sacred rather than the hustings’.⁶ They suggest that, too often, academics see themselves set apart, almost as a holy priesthood who are above suspicion or reproach. Iannacone and Lutz 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.⁷

IS THERE A PROBLEM WITH BOYS AND SCHOOLING?

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. Of course, some groups of boys — markedly, those from well-heeled families, and perhaps from Asian cultures more than non-Asian — do achieve well at school. Despite these marked differences between groups of boys, 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.⁸

Boys are emphatically not all the same. Most commentators on gender surveyed by Martin for the ACT report on boys’ education said that boys were not similar to each other.⁹ Yet the medical literature highlights, in Mathers’ words, some of the ‘clear biological causes for some of the major differentials between boys and girls’.¹⁰ Talking about boys as a group would need a sophisticated understanding of both nature and nurture and the ways they interrelate.

But governments were already

worried about males in school by the late 1990s. 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.¹¹ 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 tortuous one, as analysis will show.

THE EMPHASIS ON GIRLS

After many years of Labor Opposition federally (1949 to 1972) the Whitlam Labor Government came to power in December, 1972 with a large reform agenda. One of these agenda items concerned improving the position of women in society; another was the promise to take a fresh look at education. These coalesced in part into an impetus to improve educational chances for girls. The Karmel Report on education which reported to the Whitlam Government in 1973 declared that: ‘Being a girl is an educational disadvantage except when it is associated with high socioeconomic status’.¹² Strategies to widen educational opportunities for girls had begun (as they did in most western countries) in the mid-1970s and 1980s, and a National Action Plan for the Education of Girls was set in place. It is not possible here to set out that policy process in detail.¹³ 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' spokespersons. The policies were supported by feminist spokespersons and commentary in the educated media. There seems to have been very widespread agreement with the policy, with little stated disagreement, if any. Thus by the early 1990s girls' strategies were well established policy, and part of progressive, educated opinion. 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.

THE IDEOLOGY UNDERNEATH THE POLICY

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)¹⁴

Thus girls' education rested on feminist ideology of various kinds, whether 'socialist feminist', 'liberal feminist' or

'radical feminist'. But already in the last few words of 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 (that on girls) was some kind of policy on the other (boys). The girls' education policy rested ideologically on feminism, as suggested above. In the Australian community in the 1980s and 1990s there were probably very few people who would publicly speak against, or question, feminism. But what people thought privately was a different matter.¹⁵

Thus far, progressive thinking had incorporated the idea that educational institutions would give special assistance to girls. But if feminists wrote about, advocated and defended better education for girls, who had the authority to speak for boys and speak up for boys? And what did parents think about feminist discourses in the school, whether radical or liberal feminist? Although these shades of feminism were accepted very widely in academia, they were and became more controversial in the wider community, especially as gender issues became more controversial. Simon says that when issues become controversial, experts lose their power. There become experts for a policy, and experts against it.¹⁶ We must now turn to the rise of the new experts on gender.

BOYS' NEEDS ON THE AGENDA

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.¹⁷ In brief, commentators 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. They urged that boys be encouraged to break away from aggressive male stereotypes.

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) as a 'gender war'.¹⁸ The same term was still being used to describe girls' perceived success in school-leaving examinations in commercial television news as late as December, 2004.

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 but a bundle of issues which concerned policymakers. Issues which come onto the policy agenda do usually come in a bundle.¹⁹ In this case, the wider 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.

Enunciation of the issues was done with various degrees of subtlety and thoughtfulness by the mass media. 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. And boys' advocates did not necessarily agree with the views imputed to them by journalists concocting a 'hot issue'.

Moreover, journalists commonly take on a devil's advocate role or set up adver-

saries of some kind.²⁰ 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 unsubtle or empty-headed, as some academics seemed to suggest.²¹

The existing gender experts had their view of gender which they wished to convey to the public. But discussion about improving boys' education could of course take place outside the control of the accepted experts on gender. It took place in the daily newspapers, which began to use spokespersons for men or boys to contrast with well-established feminists and spokespersons for girls.²² The discussions also took place at informal men's gatherings, teacher conferences and workshops, and in parents' magazines.

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 *Raising Boys* was 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. It emphatically urged specific programs to affirm boys, run by male-affirming male and female teachers. These should accompany existing programs to support girls.²³

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, though this was pointed out as one of a number of indicators of boys' difficulties. Educational issues do change as they emerge and are articulated, according to Hogan and West.²⁴

THE EXPERTS REACT TO CALLS FOR CHANGE

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 spokespersons in the Department of Education and university faculties of sociology and education. These people continued to assert that girls as a class were disadvantaged, and therefore needed special assistance. They identified girls' education as something which must not be tampered with. In the mid-1990s the Teachers' Federation organised study days in which experts were brought in to denounce advocates of boys' education strategies as reactionary and anti-feminist: its journal, *Education*, chronicled the days' activities and lauded the work of girls' activists. Academics continued to uphold girls' education policies as untouchable and to lambast those who suggested assisting boys.

It was easy for these experts to deride some of the sillier discussions of 'gender wars' in the media 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. 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.²⁵ Meanwhile, a New South Wales report that demonstrated girls' educational success was buried by being released days before Christmas, 1995.²⁶ Thus the educational experts, or holy priesthood as Iannacone terms them, had been challenged, but were keeping the issue off institutional agendas, the list of matters selected for action.²⁷

ACADEMICS REACT TO THE CALL FOR CHANGE

Perhaps boys, too, were disadvantaged? In 1995 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...²⁸

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. Some academics said boys' strategies were being advocated by an unholy alliance between the media and

the men's movement; though there was no attempt to say what the men's movement was, or to name its spokespersons.²⁹ Another source had an 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.³⁰

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.

In the late 1990s 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 outcomes included suspensions and expulsions, not simply school-leaving scores, as noted by Teese et. al., and others. 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.³¹

In this way some academics used their position as experts to defuse the arguments for boys' strategies, devalue their presenters as simplistic and suggest that there are no simple answers. This carefully avoided answering the questions which boys' advocates had raised in the media and elsewhere; that is — how do we make sure that boys achieve better school outcomes?

In sum, established interests were trying to kill off the issue by whatever means they could. In this sense, the arguments about boys' education were highly ideological. Subverting Iannacone's words cited above 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 must listen not only to the experts, but to popular 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 these actors can keep

matters they do not approve of off the policy agenda.³² Academics, union spokespersons and others did veto the change in policies on gender within schools. The phrase constantly used was the need to assist boys 'without doing anything to hold back the achievement of girls'. But what was decided in the closeted surroundings of a university or a union's leadership was not always agreed to by a wider public. One recalls Iannacone's notions of a sacred priesthood unused to open critique of its thinking.³³ Public opinion shifts, probably more swiftly than the thinking in unions and boardrooms. But the change was being resisted by established interests who fought hard to keep it off the policy agenda.

THE FLAVOUR OF POLICYMAKING IN NEW SOUTH WALES

We need to remind ourselves that under the Australian Constitution, education is left for the States. However, after 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. The division of responsibility between State and Federal policy actors made it harder to get boys' education adopted as policy.

Our focus must now shift to New South Wales, the most populous of the Australian States, whose political culture has been characterised by rough-house politics and public brawling but whose educational decision-making style is incremental.³⁴ Education is one of the three largest departments in government and was known for many years as one of the most challenging portfolios for a Minister to handle. 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 simply 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 and less cumbersome.³⁵ 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 universities' leaders or academics, and employers' spokespersons. The secretary of the New South Wales Parents' and Citizens' Associations called publicly for boys' strategies in April, 1993. But this was but one voice in the educational power group at State level.

THE PUBLIC 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.³⁶ 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. By the year 2000, many private schools were engaging consultants and holding conferences to determine what should be done to improve

boys' achievement.³⁷ 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.³⁸ Parents as consumers were making their voices heard; private schools responded more quickly than public schools.

To be competitive, State schools would have to provide their own answers to boys' needs.

MAKING A START

Thus far, by the mid 1990s boys' strategies were being debated on the public agenda. They had yet to make it onto the institutional agenda, the list of matters selected for government action. The key questions were: what were governments prepared to do about the issue of boys' underachievement? And how could governments shift the debate along, when some established experts had resolutely opposed popular 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.³⁹ 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. The committee concluded that boys were at risk in many

aspects of their schooling and recommended that action begin to address these problems. The government changed hands shortly thereafter; Bob Carr formed a Labor Government by a narrow majority and O'Doherty became Shadow Education Minister for New South Wales.

Caution ruled: and nothing was done by a non-adventurous 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'.⁴⁰ Again, boys' strategies had seemingly been pushed off the institutional policy agenda. The issue was too difficult to cope with. 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.⁴¹

POLICY BREAKTHROUGH

Our focus must shift to the national arena. 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 to 2004, most notably in Western Sydney, once safe for Labor. The Howard government was also far from sympathetic to the left-leaning leaders of the New South Wales Teachers' Federation. Seizing the initiative on such a pop-

ular issue, and getting 'one up' on the Federation, might have been itself a cause for action.

Accordingly, the Howard Government accepted the challenge and referred boys' education to a House of Representatives standing 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 wide soundings from academics, parents, boys and girls and many other contributors to the debate. There was a necessary delay because of a national election in November, 2001 [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*.)⁴²

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 debates 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 — more popular among educational experts than in the wider community. 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.⁴³ 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, 2001. 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 knitted together agreement on what should be done for boys without disadvantaging girls. By making wide consultations through a parliamentary committee, the Federal Government had responded to the voices of individual parents, legitimately recognised parents' groups and the newer gender experts.

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. 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 and indeed other policy fields.⁴⁴ 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.

Perhaps paradoxically, the traditional-values philosophy of the Howard Government nationally was more sympathetic to change than the allegedly more radical New South Wales Labor Government of Bob Carr, though Hogan sees New South Wales Labor as deeply conservative in its approach to new policies.⁴⁵ 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. Questions about 'which boys' need assistance are proving difficult to answer, though

they do not trouble the elite schools, which set their sights on improving outcomes of all their male pupils. 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.⁴⁶

Second, although some academics and educators pride themselves on their knowledge of education, they have their own power base to protect. Having people such as Biddulph question this by-now established thinking was virtually a form of heresy. It was as if policy on gender was not to be questioned.

Third, as we saw in this article, the 'old' 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.⁴⁷ 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.

Fourth, Dobson's work charts the progress of women into Australian universities and questions the argument that women are still disadvantaged.⁴⁸ Similarly, the arguments by educational spokespersons that girls were disadvan-

taged became more controversial when girls' improving school outcomes were announced. It seems likely that gender will continue to be an issue hotly debated both in academia and in the public arena. It would be better if educators allowed the debate to happen rather than attempt to shut it down by ridiculing their opponents and caricaturing their arguments.

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'.⁴⁹ 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 and by others outside the inner circle of educators. Media commentaries on education are carefully watched and analysed by politicians and their minders. Education is a public good, not something owned by educators. Nor should it be.

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- ¹⁵ West interviewed men and found that men spoke sympathetically about their loved ones' aspirations. They were much more wary about feminist spokespersons they encountered. P. West, *Fathers, Sons and Lovers: Men Talk about Their Lives from the 1930s to Today*, Sydney, Finch, 1996.
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- ¹⁷ P. West, 'The Secret Lives of Men', Seminar, Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, March, 1991
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