

Media witchhunt against Australian school parents association falls flat

Erika Zimmer
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Rupert Murdoch's Sydney tabloid, the *Daily Telegraph*, recently launched a witchhunt against the New South Wales Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations. Its particular target was the P & C president, Bev Baker, in the weeks leading up to the parent body's annual conference.

The campaign attempted to undermine Baker and silence the P & C Federation's criticisms of the state Carr Labor government's education policies. The campaign failed, however, and was hastily dropped after the conference's opening day when NSW Education Minister John Aquilina was booed by parents.

The federation has 2,150 affiliated Parents and Citizens groups in NSW, representing government schools—primary and secondary—across the state. These groups seek to represent the interests of parents and their school children, and are utilised by the government and school principals to raise funds for school facilities and services.

The *Telegraph* opened its campaign with an entire front-page article, headlined “P & C fails test”. It reported that Dr Ken Boston, the head of the state Education Department, had said he would not attend the P & C's conference because it had fallen “off the rails”. Boston was reported as telling Baker she was “discrediting the parent movement”.

This broadside followed criticisms made by the P & C of government education policy on a number of fronts.

One was the Carr government's “get tough” policy towards young people. The government responded to rocketing school suspension rates by empowering principals to remove students even more quickly. The P & C described school discipline guidelines as “draconian and punitive” and a means of dumping “disposable students”. It called for inclusive policies, for schools to investigate the causes of inappropriate behaviour and develop alternative programs to deal with them.

Baker then criticised the expulsion of a group of girls from a top Sydney private school for allegedly smoking marijuana. Baker said private, as well as public schools, should be obliged to have welfare policies for students using drugs.

Next, differences surfaced when thousands of school students took part in rallies against the extreme right-wing One Nation party last year. The *Telegraph* and other media outlets sought to

generate alarm over student participation in politics.

Baker supported students' right to attend demonstrations during school hours. The *Telegraph* denounced Baker for “backing children who played truant”. She maintained that so long as students had a parent's written permission, they could not, by definition, be truanting.

On its website, the P & C posted a critique of “competition policy” in education, whereby private schools are being subsidised by the federal and state governments to establish rival, fee-charging colleges to draw students from run-down government schools.

The P & C's critique pointed out that what the government presented as providing parents and students with greater “choice” was being used to “transfer resources out of the public system and into private schools”. This, “inevitably means the end of the drive for equal provision”. The P & C paper concluded: “Competition between schools has proved in practice not to strengthen or broaden educational provision but rather to create ghettos of disadvantage to the detriment of outcomes.”

The P & C also opposed the Carr government's push to introduce the publication of school annual report cards, finalised in an agreement last year with the teachers' trade union, the NSW Teachers Federation. The purpose of these reports is to encourage parents to shift their students from under-funded government schools into better-equipped private institutions. The P & C condemned the report cards as a waste of \$700,000 that schools could put to better use.

According to the *Telegraph's* articles, the P & C executive was completely at odds with ordinary parents and the P & C leaders were, in fact, wrecking the organisation. Baker was cast as a “school drop-out”, with “no formal qualifications” for the job. Other reports distorted her views and wrote that she approved of students swearing at teachers, was “soft” on drugs in schools and encouraged students to truant.

As the witchhunt mounted, Baker was attacked for being “inflammatory”, “radical” and “extreme”. One editorial condemned her for having so “changed the perception of the P & C it is now regarded with some trepidation not only by parents but also by Parliament and the education bureaucracy”. The P & C's website was described as containing “a whole lot

of neo-Marxist gibberish that looks like it came straight out of Sociology 101". Another article included an interview with a P & C branch secretary who described the P & C's last annual conference as follows: "I felt like I was in there with Trotsky. You couldn't help but get the feeling a huge number of them were waiting for Lenin and Stalin to come floating by on a boat."

But behind the media hype, editorials run by both the *Telegraph* and the rival *Sydney Morning Herald* highlighted quotes by Boston showing the actual differences with the P & C. Boston demanded that the P & C "get back to the real agenda in schools—curriculum, testing, annual reports, competition from private schools". Boston claimed it was the P & C leaders who were responsible for driving people away from the public education system. "People have to understand we are in a state of intense competition and the public education system is not guaranteed its clientele," he said.

The *Telegraph* also published an article, "Putting market forces at the top of the class" written by Barry Maley, Senior Fellow at a right-wing Canberra think tank, the Centre for Independent Studies. Maley argued that "the fundamental malaise in public education," which he attributed to the "absence of any real parental say in what is happening in public schools," would only be addressed when "it is parents themselves paying schools of their choice". Concluding, Maley called for "market competition" to "transform education".

Overturning reality, the mass media portrays this free market agenda, complete with its calls for stepped up testing and annual school reports, as arising from genuine concern for education. The fact that performance comparisons are then used to further undermine confidence in public schools, resulting in declining enrolments and further funding cutbacks, is either passed over in silence or attributed to incompetent teachers.

By contrast, those, such as the P & C, who seek to expose this insidious agenda are presented as irresponsible wreckers of the public education system.

Having attempted to destabilise the P & C leadership, the *Telegraph* ran a series of articles heralding a rank and file revolt at the upcoming annual conference. These were based on a somewhat dubious poll conducted for the *Telegraph*. Yet, contrary to the misleading headlines, the poll showed that parents were generally supportive of the P & C.

Another article headlined "Parent groups desert Baker" and including a photograph of a P & C volunteer, was an outright deception. Neither the text nor the picture corresponded with the headline. The text dealt with two members of parent organisations that were not in a position to "desert" the P & C, never having been affiliated to the P & C Federation—a Roman Catholic schools parent group and the NSW Parents' Council. The pictured volunteer was reported as taking part in a fund-raising drive, but no reference was made to her deserting anyone.

The media campaign pushed the notion that differences with

Labor's education policies expressed only the views of a "loony" leadership, totally out of touch with grass roots parents who "rejected the P & C's ideology". Yet when Aquilina, the Education Minister, opened the P & C annual conference and attempted to defend the criticisms of Boston, his departmental head, he received a hostile response from P & C delegates, reportedly leaving the conference "ashen-faced".

Bev Baker spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the *Telegraph's* campaign and some of the concerns of parents. "The policy of the *Daily Telegraph*, if you look at their trend, is that young people are out of control, that parents don't know what they're doing, that we require draconian legislation to control those parents and young people, that public education has lost its way and that anybody with any sense would send their kids to a private school," she said. "Now we disagree with absolutely all of that and are prepared to take it on wherever we find it..."

"When you disagree with the government, the first thing they tell you is that you are unrepresentative. And that is nationwide. It isn't peculiar to NSW.

"Parents in public schools are getting quite agitated. When Mr Howard [the Australian Prime Minister] handed down his last budget it got our organisation very angry. He basically said he didn't care about public schools. They were not where the educational elite were coming from. He only cared about private schools and he would continue to fund them and open up opportunities for them to take the kids out of the public education system.

"We went to our people and said: 'Do you know that the wealthiest 80 schools in this state—schools that would have resources that you would only ever dream of—are getting \$100 million a year out of the government's purse?' People are starting to say: 'Wait a minute. This is public resources being used for private privilege. We want public resources being used for public good.'

"And that movement has started because the government has pushed it too far. People are prepared to tolerate helping people out. But they are not prepared to fund their own destruction...

"With the freeing up of conditions of the private school sector and the enormous largesse of both the federal and state government, private schools are going into areas where traditionally there were none and setting fee levels to separate and marginalise that community. The biggest growth area in private schools is in the Penrith and western suburbs areas [working class regions of Sydney]. What they are doing is marketing on the fear that has been created by articles like those of the *Daily Telegraph*."



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