

BLASTS FROM A DISTANT PAST - AUTHORISED VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

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The implementation of policy decisions can sometimes happen at break-neck speed or they can impact with the speed of the dripping of tar-like substances in a UQ engineering laboratory. I am pleased to have lived long enough to see the end of corporal punishment in Queensland schools.

All but the most avid readers of the local journal of record, the *Sunday Mail*, might have missed the couple of column inches captioned as 'last schools drop the cane'. (28/2/16) This records that Central Queensland Christian College has recently amended its discipline policy that continued, until now, to allow corporal punishment. It is now possible for the *Sunday Mail* to reassure its readers that 'corporal punishment has been removed from all schools in Queensland after internal reviews at the remaining two schools'.

When I was appointed as Director-General of Education in 1990, I inherited a policy commitment from the ALP government, derived in turn from a conference resolution sponsored by the Queensland Teachers Union. The commitment was to remove corporal punishment from Queensland schools. I embraced this commitment enthusiastically, but not because I was at all traumatised by being caned during my own school-days (although my father was very upset). It was important in my own view that Queensland follow a trend towards civilized behavior management which had seen the abolition of corporal punishment in all state schools up to two decades earlier in the rest of Australia.

Implementing this policy commitment proved unexpectedly difficult. The Catholic school system had thrived on corporal punishment. I had seen the play 'The Christian Brothers' when I first came to Brisbane in 1977 and I knew that over half of the Goss Cabinet had attended Catholic schools. I am reliably informed that when the first proposal for immediate implementation reached Cabinet that there was not majority support. Resistance was based on the axiomatic truth that each of them had reached the political pinnacle with frequent beatings so the opportunity should not be closed off to the younger generations. A second submission provided for gentle phasing in of changes over three years and for the opting-out altogether of non-state schools. But it was still apparently, like Waterloo, a close-run thing, and my Blucher was the wife of the Premier and her life-long commitment against domestic violence.

It remains a compelling argument now, as it did then, that authorizing violence against children through the school system – for whatever misdemeanor or petty crime – legitimates the same resort to violence by parents, relatives or even police. But my sad experience is that many teachers did not accept this then or even now. Removing the cane diminished their sense of authority and their perception that students would only change their behavior under threat of violence. I have met men teachers who worked in the Department of Education during my time there and sadly they regard 'dropping the cane' as one of my worst decisions.

So I was pleased to learn this morning that all the schools in Queensland have now been placed on an even playing field, after 24 years. Conducting our teaching, just like conducting domestic life or conducting ourselves in night club venues is more enjoyable with diminished threats of violence.