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## **CPL Podcast: Maurie Mulheron In Defence of Public Education**

**Host: Kate Ambrose**

**With: Maurie Mulheron**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

You are listening to the CPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host Kate Ambrose.

#### **Kate Ambrose:**

Welcome to the Centre for Professional Learning podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation, I'm Kate Ambrose and I'm the Director of the CPL.

Today I'm talking with Maurie Mulheron about the history, politics and ongoing debates surrounding public education in Australia. Maurie, welcome.

#### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Nice to be here.

#### **Kate Ambrose:**

Maurie, you retired as President of the New South Wales Teachers Federation in January of this year, could you start today by telling us a bit about your professional and political life and what led you to the classroom and what led you to eventually being President of this union?

#### **Maurie Mulheron:**

I always wanted to be a teacher, from a very young age. I loved school, I went to Punchbowl Primary School, Punchbowl Boys' High School, and had a great education and always thought that teachers were very significant people in our community, so I wanted to be a teacher.

I also saw that teaching could really change the world: that teachers had a very significant role to play in shaping the future, not just of young people's lives but of our society. I found that profound role inspired me to take up teaching and I taught in a variety of schools in Western Sydney, country areas, the Illawarra, including about 11 years, 10 years, 11 years as a Principal at Keira High School and then came in as President of Teachers Federation.

#### **Kate Ambrose:**

Fantastic! What led you to wanting to be more involved in your union; in the Teachers Federation?



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### **Maurie Mulheron:**

The Teachers Federation, when I first started teaching, had already had a very good reputation as a union: as a democratic union; high membership involvement; a very high profile within the community. It was natural that I would gravitate towards the Union. I'd come from a background (family background) involved in politics. I'd been involved in the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War, I'd been to meetings as a high school student and seen Teachers Federation officials speak at those meetings and I thought that was fantastic. So it wasn't a giant leap to get involved in the Union but, of course, circumstances also had played a part. I was out at James Meehan High School, we had a number of break ins, the library was burnt down, we had staffrooms that were vandalised and destroyed. We had, it was, a very impoverish community, there was no real security. So we started to band together, as young teachers: to protect ourselves; protect the school; get fencing; get alarm systems installed. So the Union had a relevance at a very early stage of my career and that continued throughout and of course once you get involved in the Federation and the local Association, the Council and you're going see a conference of 600 teachers, they're pretty inspiring meetings to be involved in.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

It's interesting that you mention meetings of teachers and coming together Maurie. Today you and I are meeting in the New South Wales Teachers Federation auditorium, rather than our recording studio mainly due to social distancing regulations around *COVID-19* and pandemic that we're facing around the world at the moment and this is a very special room, and I guess you've chaired and been involved in many debates in this room, how do you feel being back here?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Well, this auditorium is the heart and soul of the Federation in many respects because this is where 300 teachers, representing their local Associations, come together and develop policy. We're one of the few unions that get that many rank and file people together, eight or nine times a year, to make policy, make decisions. And I remember when we were in the old building in Sussex Street, we had the auditorium there and when we were buying this building, Ray Cavanagh, who was then I think was Deputy President, said at one Executive [meeting] – "I don't care what the plans look like but the auditorium has to be central to any new building that we purchase and develop!" And he was right, he was saying it was the heart and soul of the organisation. So it's good to be back.

I was on Council for over 30 years, participated in I don't know how many debates that would be, but a lot of debates, over the years and they're always good events our council meetings.



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### **Kate Ambrose:**

Absolutely, and 30 years of Council meetings, you would have seen a lot. What have you seen over your 30 years of being, I guess on Council and being a teacher, and being a teacher principal. What are the changes you've seen, or the reforms that have come through? What's happened in public education in New South Wales?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Look, we've seen some dark days of policy develop over the years and this Union, through its Council and through the activism of members back in schools, has resisted so many bad ideas that come from government. And really in many ways, the Teachers Federation is the bulwark that stands between bad policy from government and what's happening at the school. It's a very significant line of defence.

So over the years, of course, I got elected to executive in the *Greiner Metherell* years and they were very dark days. We have seen not just salary debates (where the value of teachers work has been argued for) but we've seen so many policies: specialisation of schools; fragmentation of our system; creation of selective schools; *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (which has decimated support for schools); attacks on our curriculum; attacks on the professional standing of teachers; attacks on our qualifications over the years; attacks on our *TAFE* system and our *TAFE* colleagues. So, there have been so many issues that this Union has fought and it's continuing to fight.

I guess what strikes me is there is nothing new: they're recurring struggles that each generation passes the torch onto the next generation to continue that fight. And it is at Council that is often the sharpest point where that campaign is developed and fought.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

You're talking about this area of public policy and government policy etc. in relation to this and education has been really hotly contested area of public policy. So what are some of the ideological tensions that you believe have led to that over the decades?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

When you think about it, public education is a relatively new development in human history. I mean it's barely a century old, you know the Act of the 1880s that brought in public education in this state and in Australia, which was happening in other parts of the world. My great grandmother was illiterate and I was only looking at her marriage certificate the other day where she signed her name with a cross, so the notion of a public education system where we would educate all children is a relatively new phenomenon.

What strikes me, at this point in my life, is the number of adults who are still resisting that notion that we should be giving equal access to education to all children. You would have thought after a century that that would be a settled matter; but it isn't. We still have it hotly contested, particularly by the



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churches and particularly by wealthy people, that some children should be more advantaged than other children. And they do it through funding policies but they also do it in the fact that they cling to their very elite schools, exempted from anti-discrimination legislation, and try and have their children given an advantage over other children. To me that is a serious moral question, an ethical question, that our community has to face. And indeed, when you look at comprehensive education in secondary terms, that's only relatively an even newer phenomenon in that it came in in New South Wales in the *Wyndham Scheme* in the 1960s where we said "no, that everyone should have an opportunity to go to the end of Year 12 (or 6<sup>th</sup> Form as it was then) and that we won't have some children going into nonacademic stream, that everyone have an opportunity" - that's only the 1960s, '67, '68 - that that came in.

It was in 1988, only 20 years later, that *Greiner* and *Metherell* started to create specialist schools, more selective schools and cut back to those days of differentiated schooling systems where some would be advantaged over others. So that battle that we have, that profound battle that we have as a society, that all children, regardless of their class or their circumstances, their background, their race or their religion, should be given equal opportunity to achieve the outcomes that we want for all: that is still contested. It was contested 100 years ago when Sir Henry Parkes (or 120 years ago when Sir Henry Parkes) was developing the Education Act and it is still contested to this day.

Indeed, in today's *Sunday Morning Herald* we have another headline where it shows that the growth in private school funding is outstripping funding to the majority system - the public system

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Why do you think we are still having those same arguments? As you said 120 years, 140 years, we've still got those same tensions and you mentioned before about the church and the wealthy sector as such, is it the same tensions?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Largely they are. I think we have a classed based society, where advantage tries to protect advantage, and that is just the reality of our society. But, as teachers, that is an offensive concept for us because when we walk into a classroom, we don't have in the back of mind that we want some children to succeed and others not to. But we do have politicians, and indeed members of the community, who quite happily would see, that in Western Sydney we have a school without resources, without physical resources, and they're happy for that to stay that way provided that their children don't go to that school and they can gain an advantage. That is essentially what we see happening.

If you look at what the *OECD* has said, we have the greatest concentrations of disadvantaged children in disadvantaged schools than in nearly any other country in the *OECD*. So the work that our teachers are doing in those schools is exponentially more difficult and more arduous because they have children in their classes that don't come from a rich linguistic background or cultural background. There is enormous poverty, social tension, social dysfunction, poor housing, lack of transport, lack of



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employment: that impacts directly on those teachers work and we have really got a seriously segregated education system.

Now, if you do happen to have a child that you're advantaging, that's okay as an individual, but in terms of the common good for all of us, that is unsustainable as a nation because there is an enormous economic and social cost to perpetuate those levels of disadvantage.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

You've said that it's got worse, we've become more segregated, our schooling system here in Australia, but the tensions remain the same, the tension between the church and state, the tension between the wealthy and the not wealthy, and I guess the growing gaps (and I might be answering the question by saying that). What has changed over the past few decades which has meant that it's become even more segregated whilst the tensions have remained the same?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Essentially funding policies are the root cause of so much of the social disadvantage. And we're probably the only nation that I can think of that funds schools in the way that we do. When other countries fund church - based schools they also require that that school to have no discriminatory enrollment practice. In other words, if you live next door to that school, you're entitled 100% to have your child enrolled in that school.

What we do, in Australia, is we allow the private schools to exclude children, exempt them from anti - discrimination but fully fund them. So basically all teachers' salaries in private schools are paid by the public purse, they get capital funding from the State and Federal governments and that's happened since the 60s. And then, of course, over , what was a trickle of funding in the early 60s (that was essentially trying to build science labs for Catholic schools) that trickle of money has now become a raging torrent. So by now we've got this situation where the Federal government has legislated (the only nation on earth where the Federal government, a national government has legislated) that 80% of the funding required for school to reach a minimum *National Schooling Resource Standard*, that 80% of that Commonwealth funding will go to private schools but only 20% of Commonwealth funding will be reserved for public schools.

So they see their role as a Federal government, the government of all Australians, their primary role is to fund and perpetuate advantage through the private school system. That's intolerable.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

How did that happen? We seem to have a strong public education system here, we have strong unions protecting the public education system, how has that happened - that 80% of government funding (the Federal government funding) goes towards non-government schools?



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### **Maurie Mulheron:**

I wish I knew if there was a simple answer to that. And it goes back through historical times with the size of the Catholic system, it goes back to the Catholic/ Protestant debate of a century or so ago. But I would have to say that the churches themselves, as institutions, particularly the Catholic church, has played a very damaging role in accelerating the segregation of schooling in this country. And, of course, once they started, the other churches, who originally opposed public funding of their schools because they wanted to be so called *independent*, suddenly realised that the Catholic church was getting all this money and so they jumped on board. So now we are funding just about every church group that has their own school, school system. And that money is coming from the same pie that we would normally divide for all children.

It breaks my heart to drive in my local suburb (and I could drive in through the suburbs of Sydney) and to see children at a bus stop from a local community all in different coloured uniforms waiting to get on different buses to go to different schools. How do you build community, and from community build a society, a nation, if you, from an early age, give the message to children - “You should not mix with other children? Some children you should mix with; other children you should not mix with.” I mean that’s a really powerful message you’re sending children, for them to stand at a bus stop, in a uniform that is different to someone who only lives four doors down from them. And yet we have adults who quite happily segregate at that early age.

In fact, in America they use busing to desegregate their schools; in Australia we use busing to segregate our school system. It’s a simple idea, but it’s essentially true.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

You spoke earlier about qualifications and the attacks on teacher qualifications, do you want to expand on that for me and explain what are the implications of that and the consequences and why we need to protect teacher qualifications? The professional status of teachers is something that I know I have committed my career to protecting and qualifications is really key to that but there seems to be an attacks on teacher qualifications from certain circles in society, why are they attacking teaching qualifications?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

They’re attacking for a variety of reasons. Many conservative politicians do see teaching as a subversive activity but that doesn’t really explain. It does go to the funding and status of teachers. If you can have teachers who have low qualifications, or poor qualifications, or are unqualified, you can pay them less. So we see, for instance in the UK, (now this is not some poor country developing with an economy in ruins; we’ve got the UK). The UK now has a position in schools called *UQT* (Unqualified Teacher). So if you Google “unqualified teaching jobs UK” you’ll see just hundreds of pages of jobs for “unqualified Maths teacher”, “unqualified Science teacher”, “unqualified English teacher”. And of course they are



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paid at a lower rate and that's good for government, you know; it's a lower wages bill. Not good for kids; not good for the profession.

We saw that happening also in the US and the UK and we saw that on the international stage that teaching qualifications are being attacked. We saw it in our own *TAFE* system in New South Wales many years ago, when qualified tertiary education for qualification for *TAFE* teachers was withdrawn, so this is not a long long way from home for us.

So we have realised that we have to, if we're going to protect ourselves as a profession and remain a profession, (and you only remain a profession if your entry standards coming into it are high and then you maintain those standards throughout the career) we have to be. If the Union doesn't protect those qualifications and those standards then who is going to do it? Because it certainly isn't going to be the government. That's one of the reasons why we embrace the *accreditation process*, the *Teaching Standards*. They were very important, not as a perfect defence, but certainly helped us protect what a qualified teacher in New South Wales is.

The conservatives in other countries like the US start schemes like *Teach for America* which has become *Teach for All*, we've got *Teach for Malaysia*, *Teach for Germany*, *Teach for India*, all over the world, this franchise. And we have a *Teach for Australia* (can't come into New South Wales because of the legislation protecting our accreditation process) but certainly in other places have entered and they are people who have had 6 to 10 weeks of training and thrown into a school to teach. Saves a lot of money but it also shows an enormous disrespect to teaching as a profession: that you can have someone who can be given weeks of training and suddenly think they can go into complex areas of teaching in a school and be able to survive and have an impact on kids. I can't think of "Architecture for Australia" or "Dentistry for Australia" or "Brain Surgery for Australia". I mean the notion that we want to get more people to become neurosurgeons by actually saying they can do it in 10 weeks, why waste four or five years. You know this contempt that too many politicians have for the teaching profession is often manifested in those kinds of policies.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

You were talking about teacher accreditation or teacher registration in other States, I've heard it described before as prior to having teaching accreditation in New South Wales being a teacher was an employment contract between an individual and the employer. But by having accreditation we have a profession in New South Wales and that's what we build on - do you agree with that notion?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Absolutely. I think the accreditation process has allowed teachers to define what we mean by *professional*. Before that, if I was to say - "What is a profession? What is a trade? What is a profession? How do we distinguish? What makes someone a professional?" And it's not good enough to say that "I've got a university degree". My university degree; I graduated in '77. Now that was fine for the first few years



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but it wouldn't stand me in good stead forever. I had to maintain a commitment to my professional learning throughout my career. The *accreditation process* has allowed us to formalise that. It has allowed us to say "look, there's a certain standard that we expect that teachers will engage in in their relationship to their subject matter, student wellbeing, interacting with their community, with their colleagues. There are certain behaviours that will help define you as a professional. Why not have a common language, so that we're all speaking about the same thing?" and that becomes *the standard* and I think it's been a critically important development over the last 10 to 15 years.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

It's interesting too, you talk about if you hadn't sort of engaged in any more learnings since 1977, where would you be now? I can't help but think about the Teachers Federation's motto and my Latin isn't great so I'm going to say "*Qui docet discit*" (please correct me if I'm wrong) but '*those who teach learn*'. I think it actually translates to "*He who teaches learns*", and that's really so much the basis of what we do, and I guess what the CPL stands for too, about that continual learning of teachers and that right of the teacher to engage in continual learning and the importance of it and what does that then mean for their students.

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Absolutely and our children deserve no less than to have people who actively engage, with an enquiring mind, about "how can I improve? How I deliver? How can I have a better idea of how to manage disciplinary behaviour? How can I learn to use technology better in the classroom?" All the different things that *professional learning* provides for teachers, that's important.

Teachers have also got a right to expect the employer to provide it too. One of the upsides of the *accreditation / standards process* is it has allowed the Union to argue for more funding for professional learning which we were able to secure. But now there's an obligation of the employer to do it. Now, whether they are doing it well, whether they are doing: it is a separate question. But, at least we have established that principle that there is a requirement of the employer to provide quality professional learning. And I'm so pleased that our Union has also taken up the challenge with the Centre for Professional Learning.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

I think that coming together of teachers to learn together in professional development activities and professional learning opportunities, where they are coming together and they are connecting with one another and sometimes they are coming from different schools and there's passion and there's knowledge being shared (and I'm just thinking about that in regards to what we were saying about being in this auditorium and hundreds of Union activists coming together with passion, with



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connection to come together) there's those links about being a good unionist and a good teacher and how they are not interchangeable

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

At the risk of offending some people, I see that, you can't be a good teacher if you're not a good unionist. I'm sorry. You have to have that notion of being part of a profession; joining with 60,000 other teachers in New South Wales. That, I think, it's an obligation that you would engage in your union; that's a professional obligation that you engage in the union and be a member and contribute to it so that you're a contributing to the common good of all the profession. I've always believed that throughout my teaching career.

### **MUSICAL INTERLUDE/ANNOUNCEMENT**

The Centre for Professional Learning offers a wide range of development opportunities throughout New South Wales at a fixed rate of members of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. For course information, dates, locations, and registration details, visit [www.cpl.asn.au](http://www.cpl.asn.au)

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Maurie, you are a History teacher, is that correct?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Yes, English and History.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

English and History, I'm also a History teacher. So I want to ask you, probably a lot in that context of you being a History teacher, but also being a teacher and a unionist.

Over time we've witnessed significant political tension, or conflict, about the curriculum that we teach, and what do you consider to be the origins and dangers associated with this? And I'll give you an example; in 2005 John Howard, the then Prime Minister of Australia, called for an *official* Australia History, one that he said would not be questioned or repudiated. What do you make of this, particularly given the current climate of upheaval around the world where historical accounts are being questioned?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Well history is always fluid, and that's the important thing to realise about history. There's no *official* history. It's in a permanent state of flux as we reflect our social values of the time, as we uncover more research, as we investigate. So there is no such thing as an official history. In fact History is not so much just a body of knowledge. It's also a set of skills about enquiring -what question to ask, how do you judge a document on whether it's true or not? You know - what are the skills you need as an



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historian to see whether that is a document that's fraud or real? What's the impact on it? So I think that notion that there is an official history, conservatives would love to have the official history and John Howard would love to have the official history (but only one he could write) where John Howard is at the centre of it and he would write about himself as being a very important Prime Minister but that's not how other people saw John Howard. For every person who voted for John Howard there was a lot of people who didn't vote for him, so there's the contest immediately.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Their histories are different.

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Their histories are very different. So this notion of an official history is always dangerous. But that's not to say that the content isn't important. And I just want to, you mention curriculum and the curriculum wars, but at this point in our history, I'm very concerned at the calls to reduce the content in our Syllabuses. I'm really very, very worried that teachers might get what they wish for; some teachers may get what they wish for. *Content* is critically important. We need to know what is good literature and we need to read those texts. We need to know there are certain historical facts that we need to know. We need to know that the development of Fascism in 30s led to over six million people being killed in the concentration camps in Eastern Europe; they're important facts to know. So the content is important and I'm really worried that there is this false kind of binary argument being created of *general capabilities*, (the new buzz word at the moment) verses *content* as though somehow one isn't connected to the other. We give people capabilities and skills through the content that we teach and that's particularly important at the moment.

There is an attack on knowledge; you only have to see it through Trump and other people. You only have to see it through the anti-vaxxers; you even see it now - people saying "COVID-19 is exaggerated, it's just a scare." This attack on scientific knowledge (the attacks on climate change activists, you know the climate change deniers) is an attack on scientific knowledge. There was a time when we actually gave enormous credit to scientists but now we have attacks. I think at this point in our history, our job as teachers, is to protect the architecture of our syllabuses in particular protect the content. That's not to say we can't get rid of something or whatever.

And there is another reason why I'm concerned about it. The international testing companies, the big Edu-businesses that are driving so much, don't like national curriculum. They don't like local syllabuses because they can't have a generic test when there is a national curriculum or a local syllabus. And they would like nothing better than to create international generic tests that they can sell to national governments and one of the impediments for that is for Australian students to have to learn Australian Literature and Australian History, Geography and things that are pertained to our nation and our economic circumstances. Those kind of things prevent them having this generic international testing.



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So, I think there is a danger when we weaken the content in our syllabuses; that we're actually laying the groundwork for the big Edu-business to come in and impose a curriculum through a testing regime where the test, the backwash from the test, becomes curriculum - teaching to the test and that's a concern that I have.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

So, as teachers, we use assessment and data every day to inform us about where our students are at, and whether we can design implement teaching strategies that are responsive to the learning needs and strengths of each of our students. However, based on what you've just said, we've got this notion of *high stakes testing* of students around the world and I understand that has also led to the misuse of student assessment data which is critical to the success I guess of many of those Edu-businesses etc. So, how do teachers protect their professionalism whilst fighting against that agenda?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

The first thing we need to do is keep going back to our syllabuses and curriculum as what we teach in the classroom. And we've got to resist pressure to *teach to the test*. Where you have weak curriculum, weak syllabuses, the testing agenda takes root in a much stronger way like in the US and places. But here we've got strong syllabuses, particularly in New South Wales, so we need to protect them. You're quite right to be concerned about the misuse of the data because we see it with *NAPLAN*; a very poorly constructed test, developed by a commercial company, that teachers didn't develop or have much role to play in it, the educators didn't see, that came from a political construct essentially. And we had this deliberate misuse of the data where people are saying that "the data informs your teaching". No! The data that teachers develop is much richer than any one - off test. Data is after all not information: information is not knowledge. And yet links between the three are often created. Teachers can easily have their work devalued if we don't allow them the opportunity to develop their own assessment regimes and collecting their own information. It's much richer when a child walks into your room with all the other children: you see the social interaction; you know their background; you can see the mood they're in; you can see where the learning is taking place. There are a hundred different cues in the first 10 minutes of the lesson that you pick up on that helps you teach. Your knowledge of the syllabus outcomes will inform the kind of questions you put and tasks that you give your students. So much richer than a commercial test. And yet we have privileged, as a society, these tests. I think the pushback with *NAPLAN* now is been tremendous. I think really, it's very much a discredited test. But that's very different to the HSC and sometimes I get concerned that people link the two.

The HSC is actually not a test: it's an examination of what has been taught and that's a very different animal and it comes directly from our syllabus outcomes. So the best way to prepare for the HSC, give the students the syllabus and say "there are outcomes in those syllabus documents where the examiners



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will draw the questions. Know your syllabus, know what you need to learn and you'll be right for the exam" It's very different to the one - off commercial *NAPLAN* test.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Maurie, we've talked about teachers who are qualified, we don't have a six week training program here New South Wales. We're talking about qualified teachers who have to know about syllabus outcomes, who have to have all the content, who need to understand the teaching strategies, who are assessing, as you've just described, 30 students who are walking into their classroom each day or each hour and try to decipher where they are at. So it's a pretty important role and it takes a lot of skill I think, just based on that. So, why have teachers become the scapegoat for society's woes and problems?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

I think for a start, there are a lot of us, we're highly unionised and it takes a big part of a government's budget (as we think it should be). But when you've got politicians who actually don't believe in the notion of government provision. When I started teaching we owned Post Offices, Airlines, Insurance companies, we owned energy. But now it's all been privatised and the last bastion of that is schooling. And I think, in many ways, teachers are seen as problem because we demand from government funding of our schools, professional salary. And those neo-liberal politicians who like to have low taxation for corporations and who don't want to invest public money, and achieve office purely to ensure the corporations are given a leg up all the time, they see teachers as a problem. And it gets back to an earlier question when we talked about curriculum. They also see that we are producing ( hopefully, if we are doing our job properly, we're producing) young people with very enquiring minds, who question: question society; question history; question what's going on. That's part of our role, we don't just reproduce the information; we make children critical thinkers. For many politicians that's seen as a dangerous activity. But then I see sometimes we're not alone (with the *wage freeze*, for instance, that the New South Wales government is attempting to apply to the entire public sector) that suddenly the nurses who are heroes in March during *COVID-19* suddenly don't deserve a pay rise in July this year. I think it's a notion that they don't like particular public sector in general.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

What you're describing is that, in some circles, there is a deeply held belief that there is little role in government to play in providing services to the public, that's what you've just described. And I know you've spoken in the past about the neo-liberal agenda of a constant push for education reform that is actually based on a fallacy and that educational crises have been manufactured both here in Australia and overseas. What direct impact does that have on teachers and their students?



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### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Teachers I think see themselves sometimes under siege, and not supported by government. And there are so many manifestations of those kinds of attacks, not just salary and status and qualifications being under attack: questioning the syllabuses and curriculum that we teach; imposing testing regimes on us; fragmenting our system; funding some schools and not others; not building schools where they needed to be built. That's all part and parcel of the attack that teachers see on the profession. And I think that that has an impact. But at the same time, teachers are extraordinarily resilient people too. You have to be resilient to be a teacher. Teaching is not for the faint hearted. Linda Darling-Hammond said, "teaching is rocket science". It's highly complex, you've got to be resilient, [to have] strong emotional strength, psychological strength to go into the classroom. And a large personality: one personality that is a little bit larger than the other 29, 30 in the room, so at least you're noticed. It is a very complex, extraordinary job. But I've said this to beginning teachers, and I really mean it – "you can walk the length and breadth of this city from Central down to Circular Quay and pass the representation of just about every profession there is - economist, accountants, medical people and shop keepers. You will not encounter anyone whose work is more important than the work of teachers." Because, teaching is the profession that actually creates the future through our young people. Public education, in particular, is the great gift of one generation to the next.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Maurie, we've talked a little bit about high stakes testing of students around the world and the misuse of student assessment data - where did that come from?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Look, Australia has a great capacity to import stupid ideas, so many ideas in social policy, particularly education policy, are not homegrown. There is one thing I have learnt over the years it that our politicians are extremely lazy and they are great at plagiarising. The high stakes testing, look there is a big bang year, I think, and that was 1983 when a report was released in the US, when Ronald Reagan was president, called '*A Nation at Risk*'. It was an extraordinary paper because it made out a case that there was a decline in educational standards and the test data was showing a massive decline. And instead of having educators write the report, '*A Nation at Risk*' they actually employed professional writers to do it. So you see you have terms such as *rising tide of mediocrity* and *act of war, history is not kind to idlers*, this is the kind of language sprinkled throughout this report.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Very emotive.



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Very emotive language, - *the educational foundation of our society is presently being eroding by a rising tide of mediocrity* – and, of course, Reagan got great press. And suddenly he realised he had the perfect weapon that he could use against public education and teachers and their demands for more funding by saying, “you are a problem”, “you’re turning out mediocre students”, “America is going to decline as a nation”. So testing then became rooted in American culture from about that time on.

At the same time, the UK and the USA, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were very close allies. Reagan pulled America out of *UNESCO* and *UNESCO* was going to develop a global test but one that would actually take into account linguistic differences, social economic differences, cultural differences so that we could actually see which nations were funding their education and which nations weren’t doing it properly, so it was going to be very good. He pulled out of *UNESCO* and demanded that they have a test that actually looked at the economic benefit of schooling. “If we’re going to put this much money into it, we want to see whether the dollar we’re getting bang for the buck” So he then turned to the *OECD*. Thatcher, the following year, did the same thing, she pulled out of *UNESCO* and they put pressure then on the *OECD* and everyone knows the history now - we’ve got the *OECD* testing regime. That’s essentially where the nation of testing began in modern times. Where testing was going to be used to see whether you could actually assess whether governments were getting bang for their buck, they were investing this much money, were they getting something out of it, but of course it became extraordinary restrictive.

The irony of ‘*A Nation at Risk*’ (that ’83 report I talked about) was based on faulty data. What had happened in America, in the 60s and 70s, was more and more students from a diverse range of backgrounds were actually staying on at school and so the testing scores were not being lowered. You can have an effect known as the *Simpson’s paradox* where you can have some subgroups move in a certain direction and the mean could move in another. It may give the impression initially that there is a decline in standards but you actually now having a lot more people tested in different subgroups. And when the scientists tried to point that out to the government, they literally were threatened with dismissal if they made it public that ‘*A Nation at Risk*’ was a false report. Too late, so by the late 80s in Australia, you know, even within a period of four or five years, we had *Basic Skills Test* introduced in New South Wales by Nick Greiner who had brought out to Australia Thatcher’s Education Secretary. They had very close relationships between the *Tory* party in the UK and the *Liberals* out here.

And the thing about testing is, teachers will never get on top of it. You’ll never be able to produce good test results. Let’s absolutely make this clear - no matter what you do, how hard you work, whatever you do, you will never get good test scores because the whole point of the testing regime is to perpetuate the myth that teachers are not doing their jobs. So the goal posts will change all the time; the tests will change all the time. Basically, a sense of putting teachers on a permanent treadmill, the testing treadmill, and moving away from the rich kind of assessment that we know teachers should and could do.



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### **Kate Ambrose:**

That sounds like a bit of a, when I say modern, I mean over the past 30 or 40 years concept. So has education always been seen in an economic sense or how was public education seen when it was first promoted in Australia but also before?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Before we came to a *universal education* and remember in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *universal education* meant essentially primary education and secondary was not really all that developed. It was mainly basically going from a standing start where some children weren't given any education and before then, of course: wealthy people had private tutors; there were some church schools in existence; there were some very rudimentary public primary schools. But there was no real sense of universal system of education. Illiteracy was very high and it was people like Sir Henry Parkes, and others, who really saw himself as a nation builder. After all it is no coincidence that the person, who founded public education in Australia, also was one of the *Founding Fathers* (for want of a better term) of the Federation of Australia. He really saw that it was inextricably linked: you can't build yourself as a nation unless you actually have children educated from a very early age. And he had this wonderful phrase where he said "we need children sitting side by side, regardless of their faith or their background" That notion of sitting side by side still resonates with me to this day. And so the Education Act that he created in about 1880 was very powerful. That is not so long ago, you know, in terms of human history of thousands of years. It's just a bit over a century that we actually had people thinking, - "wouldn't it be a good idea if actually we made society obliged to teach all their children with a common curriculum and knit them together and then, from that, build community."

### **Kate Ambrose:**

And I think the irony of that, is that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Australia was a very rich nation, we were amongst one of the richest nations in the world and so with those coinciding by educating our people, we also were adding to being an economically rich country which was not Parkes' idea, you're talking about building a nation but then that is being used against us now, in terms of now education is all about, is seen by politicians in an economic sense, so there is this funny irony that has happened there I guess historically.

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Look, yes, I think we're not well served by our politicians. What I think, the comment I would make is that, so many of our politicians have come from a fairly elite private school background who only send their children to private schools and they've got a very poor knowledge of the public education system. they certainly don't have any profound belief in it and that's why they can be so cavalier I think in terms of funding.



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**Kate Ambrose:**

Do they have different expectations of private schools and public schools, do you think?

**Maurie Mulheron:**

They certainly, there is less transparency in private schools, so they are less well-regulated in that sense. I think they see public schools as being able to turn out a literate workforce, a numerate workforce; not much more than that. And their kind of goal for education is relatively low. And we, as teachers, don't have that, we have very high expectations of what we do as teachers and what we expect from our schools and our children. There is a tension there I think.

**Kate Ambrose:**

And in many of those very wealthy, independent schools we have a lot of money invested in the Arts, a lot of money invested in nice environments for people to be in. But as you just said there before, there are very low expectations from some circles of politicians, and other members of society, of our public schools, yet the Arts and the niceties I guess of society are very much encouraged outside of it.

**Maurie Mulheron:**

Because that's been made worse by the whole *NAPLAN* nonsense too where we have narrowed the curriculum and Performing Arts and Creative Arts programs have collapsed. You talk about the nice schools, I think we need to keep reminding everyone that the public school system in Australia does not get one single dollar from the Commonwealth government for capital (for buildings) it comes from the State, but private schools get both State and Federal capital funding so they can keep building, essentially for the purpose of marketing, you know the sandstone gates and whatever they have and so that's another, not just recurrent funding in equity but now capital funding.

**Kate Ambrose:**

We've talked about as two History teachers, we talked about the dangers to some people teaching History to students and what that enables the students to be able to do and that it empowers them. And you've mentioned now talking about the Arts, what are the dangers of narrowing the curriculum to cut down on the Arts?

**Maurie Mulheron:**

Part of being a critical thinker is having a very broad education. You can't just teach children basic literacy and numeracy, and those two words now in my mind, have become terms of abuse. I reckon if we could improve education in Australia, we just ban those words, don't use them. Don't use *literacy* and *numeracy*. That's a given in every one of our syllabus documents, you don't have to use it because if you're teaching the syllabus then you will be teaching literacy and numeracy. I think that they've now almost become a weapon that's used against us. But you can see even denial of the use of the word



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*History* in our schools and replaced with the *HSIE* (Human Society and Its Environment). *HSIE*, it doesn't exist as a subject, it's not a discipline. And yet we have seen History faculties fold in so many schools, History Head Teacher positions go and just then it's an amorphous thing called *HSIE*. We see primary school teachers never use the word *History*, they use the word *HSIE*. The scrubbing of that word out of our daily lexicon is a real concern for me as well. The word *history* has to be there, it is a discipline in its own right. It is not part of a social studies interesting kind of work concept. It's a subject; it's a discipline. And yet we see secondary school after secondary school get rid of Head Teacher History positions and then create Head Teacher *HSIE*. As I said the primary schools teaching *HSIE* and I remember when the report came out, the report came out all those years ago, where they stated "for god sake, these are not faculties; these are not structures. These are *Key Learning Areas* to make sure that children have a breath of education." So they're not just concentrating on the Maths and Sciences or just concentrating on Humanities but they've got Creative Performing Arts, they've got different Social Studies and History and Economics and Geography, and they've got Maths and Science." It was meant to say there are all these, make sure you've got them spread and yet very quickly they were seen as structures in our schools and I think the Music education has suffered from it as a stand alone, now it's just part of an amorphous *CAPA* (Creating and Performing Arts) and I think History is the other great casualty in that.

I'm a great fan of people saying; let's bring back the word *History* back into the lexicon in a daily basis.

**Kate Ambrose:**

Bring back the History faculty?

**Maurie Mulheron:**

Bring back the subject of History as History.

**Kate Ambrose:**

We talked a lot about power of language in different ways, including the '*A Nation of Risk*' report and how we name subjects etc. and how we refer to them. There's been a creeping of the language of corporations and businesses into our schools, sometimes people will start talking about Principals as Managers rather than as teachers, or as Principal teachers and people talking about students and parents as clients, what are the dangers in that?

**Maurie Mulheron:**

Look the business terminology is throughout all areas of government now but manifests now as you say in education.



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**Kate Ambrose:**

Is it deliberate?

**Maurie Mulheron:**

Yeah, I think so. I mean *Local School, Local Decisions* has exacerbated it, that devastating policy framework that came in March 2012, redefining the role of a Principal from a *Principal teacher* to becoming the *Principal Manager* of assets and staffing and resourcing, which is never their role. They were the leading teacher of a school, the *Principal* (adjective) *teacher* (noun). And yet we see that role redefined over the last few years. But we also see (what horrifies me, is) the creation of positions like Business Managers. Business Managers in school: as though it's somehow someone's small business. You're quite right: *parents as clients*.

And you see it when you're on the train system, there was a time where you could catch a train and the guard would say, "Would all *passengers* please alight" but now "would all *customers* please alight". So you immediately give people the impression that they are purchasing a service: that is not a human right to have transport provided and water and other things and education that you have to purchase it through tolls and other. So it's really is about turning the *citizen* into the *customer*. And that's why that language is very much deliberate, *client focused, customer focused*, pretending that the parents somehow is a *purchaser* of a service that the school is providing as opposed to this is your right as a citizen to have quality education provided to you, regardless of your income or purchasing capacity. So I think that business terminology is deliberate and it's meant to force it to reconfigure how we see ourselves and our students and our parents and our community, absolutely.

**Kate Ambrose:**

You've talked a bit today about the *Greiner* Government and *Metherell* as the Education Minister. The very first Federation rally I went to, my first really explicit exposure to the Teachers Federation, was the big rally in the domain on the 17<sup>th</sup> August in 1988. I was a bit younger than you at the time and I was a school student at the time and the fight then was about deregulation and privatisation of our schooling system and we are still fighting against deregulation and privatisation. And the other recurring theme, throughout my whole life, we've been fighting for equitable funding of public schools in this country. Why are we fighting the same fight?

**Maurie Mulheron:**

Well I think if there's anything we learned that each generation will keep those, there are not new battles, it's the same essential tensions that each generation of teachers will campaign for. They may look different, they may be called different things, but essentially it is about trying to give children the best opportunity to grow as individuals and that requires a commitment from government.



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You mentioned privatisation and that's one of the big concerns that we have as a current generation of teachers. Who would have thought 30, 40 years ago that we would privatise our telecommunication systems; all our energy conglomerates; water is under threat; *Australia Post* under threat; defunding the *ABC*; we even have private roads with tolls; privatising the buses; we've privatised the ferries; the last kind of bastion of public ownership is really the schooling system. We have private early childhood education essentially is the norm, incredibly expensive; our *TAFE* system is under attack by contestable funding and privatisation; universities of course, governments are now the minority provider of funding to universities and so the last really public utility that governments are providing is schooling.

Why would we think that that would also not become, if we let it, also a system for profit (commercialised). Now it happened in a country like Sweden where commercial companies are allowed to run schools, so it's not a million miles away. And that to me is one of the great threats to us: this notion that we have to keep defending that education should be *free, compulsory* and *secular* and well-funded. Because there are people out there who see it as potential industry, undercapitalised, where huge profits could be made. And the reason for that is because children are an inexhaustible resource; people are going to keep having kids and we're going to keep saying that between the ages of 5 to 16 - 17 they are going to have to go to school for about 12 or 13 years.

When you're a businessmen you think – “my god they'll always be millions of potential customers.” So that's why big companies are now moving into commercial schooling systems in the global South in countries throughout Asia, Latin America, Africa, big companies in the US based or UK based are doing it and we've got to be really conscious of that when we defend our qualifications, defend our funding, defend our system as a free secular compulsory system.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Whilst we're still fighting the same fights, we're not losing.

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

No! I think if there is anything we are able to achieve in the recent school funding campaigns. These wars have been fought for a long time but what happened 8 or 9 years ago, with the *Gonski* report and then the subsequent campaigns that were fought, what I think the teaching profession, with their allies in the community, were able to achieve was to change the essential narrative of the day. That *competition and choice*, winners and losers in other words, would drive out quality. And that the right of a parent to choose what school they went to and have it funded by government, (so the personal choice also had to be funded by government) that was what drove education funding policies. Then when we created the impetus for the *Gonski* review, they came down with a much different, very different perspective; they said that as a nation we achieve *excellence through equity* and that we can't leave any child behind. We are poorer as a nation if we leave large swathes of the community behind. And,



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therefore, funding is needed to close the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged and the more that gap widens, the worse we'll be as a nation.

We changed that narrative and that's even there today, so even conservative politicians now who want to undermine that funding are still trying to (they have stolen some of our language) but they still have accepted that basic principle even if they don't actually implement it in practice. So we've changed the narrative.

The challenge now, for this generation of teachers, is to make sure that we never revert back to that other language of competition and choice and excellence through equity is what should drive us.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Maurie I think you've answered a lot of this question, but I want to ask it; it's a big question. What's the role of unions in protecting public education in Australia and around the world?

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

I would go so far as to say that Teacher Unions are probably one of the most critical organisations in any society. It is not just about fighting for better working conditions and teachers' salaries. Almost inevitably when we improve the lot of teachers we improve the lot of kids and that's important. But we play a role in uniting the profession, protecting the profession, protecting our school systems, and ultimately serving our children. I think that is why Teacher Unions are always under attack everywhere, in some countries to the extent that Teacher Union leaders in the Philippines have been murdered and different countries, such is the danger that politicians see them as.

Teacher Unions are very important. They become the critical voice of the profession, they take it up to government because it is such a hotly contested area of public policy, we need to be at the table and through the union the profession is sitting at the table. So you as a teacher in a school, you can't necessarily be at the table with the Premier, but you know that someone, from your ranks, is sitting there with you in mind, speaking on your behalf, and that is I think very important for teachers to understand that.

### **Kate Ambrose:**

Maurie, thank you so much for coming in and speaking with me today, it's been such a pleasure to have you here.

### **Maurie Mulheron:**

Thank you.



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### **Kate Ambrose:**

You've been listening to the CPL podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation, I'm Kate Ambrose and I'm the Director of the CPL. I've been speaking with Maurie Mulheron about the history, politics and ongoing debate surrounding public education in Australia.

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### **CONCLUSION:**

The CPL podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers only and do not represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Kate Ambrose. Technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

*Maurie Mulheron began his teaching career in 1978 in the outer south-western suburbs of Sydney and taught in a number of high schools in rural, regional and metropolitan New South Wales (NSW).*

*From 2001-2011, Maurie was Principal of Keira High School in the regional city of Wollongong, NSW. In 2011, he received an award from the NSW Department of Education for "Excellence in Leadership Demonstrated by a Principal".*

*Maurie was elected to the full-time position of President of the NSW Teachers Federation in 2012 and held that position until January 2020 leading the Union's many campaigns on salaries and working conditions, school funding, against the privatisation of the vocational education sector in defence of teaching standards and in opposition to mass testing and league tables.*