

# Challenging sexism in elite boys' schools

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**Margaret Thornton**

Australian National University, Canberra



Amid the brouhaha concerning Christian Porter and the sexual conduct of men in parliament who are the products of private boys' schools, we have not heard much about class as a dimension of the problem that needs to be remedied. We cling to the myth that Australia is classless. Indeed, no Australian anti-discrimination legislation outlaws discrimination on the ground of class, although it is one of the most marked manifestations of inequality in our society.

The normalisation of class in conjunction with gender and race has been thrown into high relief in the wake of recent allegations that men in Parliament House have sexually harassed and assaulted women with impunity. While Kate Jenkins' inquiry into the culture of Parliament House is welcomed, I suspect the terms of reference will be narrowly drafted and unlikely to address the culture that pervades private boys' schools and carries over into the workplace. However, it is in these schools that the bonds of homosociality are forged and then transmitted to the professions, as well as corporate and political life.

What is shocking in our supposedly egalitarian society is that private boys' schools – a hangover from 19th century British imperialism – receive substantial funding from the public purse. All Australian taxpayers, including those who attended under-funded public schools or whose children attend such schools, are contributing to the reproduction of a misogynistic system of privilege. However much the principals of private boys' schools seek to deny this cultural norm, the evidence is incontrovertible. If boys only encounter girls in conventionally gendered roles, commonly as relatives, rather than as peers in the classroom, how can they be expected to relate to women respectfully as equals in the workplace or in political life?

Accordingly, I think it is time we moved from mere rhetoric about social change and took steps to remedy a system that perpetuates gross inequality. While I can't see our society legislating to outlaw class discrimination any time soon, it would nevertheless be desirable to do something about an

education system that upholds sexism and privilege. This could be done by limiting the extent to which private single-sex schools continue to receive public funding.

While proponents of certain religious groups claim the right to have their children educated in the context of a particular value system, it is undeniable that religion is frequently a proxy for class, particularly in the most elite schools. Yet our society implicitly condones discrimination on the ground of gender, race and class by perpetuating anachronistic private single-sex schools. Furthermore, if these schools discriminate in accordance with 'the doctrines, tenets, beliefs or teachings of a particular religion or creed', they are likely protected by s 38 of the federal *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. The provision can be challenged but complaints are difficult to prove and tend to be limited to individual instances. More thoroughgoing measures are required.

Instead of continuing to emulate Imperial Britain in sustaining private boys' schools that are breeding grounds for elitism and misogyny, Australia could take a leaf from the American legislative model. Title IX of the *US Civil Rights Act of 1964* imposes a prohibition on sex-based discrimination in any school or education program that receives public money. It applies to sexual harassment, sexual violence and transgender issues, as well as admissions and other issues that may be determined from time to time, such as the funding of sport.

Rather than simply advocating sex education courses for boys as the way forward, far-reaching social change could be effected if tied to state funding. I advocate a proactive initiative by attaching conditions of non-discrimination to public funding, particularly as the hip pocket nerve has proven an effective way of bringing about social change. If private boys' schools wish to persist with discriminatory conduct, they should at least not be permitted to do so with the support of public funds and the imprimatur of the state.

I am not naively suggesting that all problems pertaining to sexism, racism and class will be remedied by calling to account private boys' schools but addressing the issue of their funding would be an important first step.

Nevertheless, to get any such change through parliament would require a champion – but on whom could we rely in the Morrison government?

**Margaret Thornton** is an Emerita Professor at the ANU College of Law, Australian National University, Canberra.  
Email: Margaret.thornton@anu.edu.au