Speech Notes
Rt Hon David Lange

"Another Day for Tomorrow's Schools"

The Clem Hill Memorial Lecture

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Massey University
Palmerston North

Summary

Tomorrow's Schools was a radical model of school administration. Its strength lies in the local management of schools through boards of trustees. But the model has been subverted by the competitive element and further undermined by the failure of the government's chief education agency.

Tomorrow's Schools was not designed to be a competitive model of schooling. Schools were encouraged to compete for students when the National government removed geographic school zoning and the ballot for places in out-of-zone schools. It also reduced funding for schools in difficult areas, and abolished forums designed to give parents and caregivers the means to complain about poorly-performing schools. In the view of the National government, competition for students and the funding each student attracted would allow good schools to drive out bad schools.

In practice, the competitive model has meant that many students are condemned to failing schools. The country's spending on education is not used to best advantage and we've lost sight of equality of opportunity in schooling.

The ministry of education was deliberately allowed to become a spectator of school failure. When ministers in the coalition government have at last recognised that school failure was reaching politically unacceptable levels, they ordered intervention in an ad hoc manner. The ministry is dysfunctional and unfit for the partnership

bewteen government and schools which was the basis of Tomorrow's Schools.

None of this was inevitable. Schools have been made to compete, and the ministry of education made ineffective, as a matter of political choice. The choice can be reversed. The chief political issue about schooling is not whether schools should be bulk-funded or the education review office abolished. This is detail. The heart of the matter is the choice between a competitive model of schooling and a collaborative model, between the market model and equality of opportunity.

May I first of all thank the university for the chance to speak to you and acknowledge the name of Clem Hill in whose memory this lecture is given.

The organisers asked me to speak about Tomorrow's Schools.

I should make it clear at the start that what I have to say has as much to do with politics and the political process as it has to do with education and school administration. It's obvious that I'm neither an educator or an administrator. My interest in school administration is almost entirely political. As a practising politician I had an interest in who got an education, what kind of education was available, and who was going to pay for it. It was that interest which formed my view of the kind of schools we should have, and still forms my view of the schools we have actually got.

What I plan to describe tonight is the way in which education has been shaped by the political process, and may still be remodelled through that same process.

This is what I am going to say.

First, I'm going to describe the democratic model of management which was the basis of Tomorrow's Schools, and how it has been subverted by the competitive element, with results which I'm certain are as bad for the country as they are for its schools.

Then I plan to talk about the effect of restructuring on the education bureaucracy. As I was there at the start of the restructuring, I owe it to you to tell you what we were thinking about. It certainly wasn't what we've ended up with. I shall describe how the government's most important education agency has been corrupted.

That will bring me, in the end, to the question of what should be done next. If we wish to reinvigorate the democratic and hopeful element in our society, there is every reason why we should start in our schools. I am going to argue that Tomorrow's Schools is a good place to begin.

I should start by explaining exactly what I mean by Tomorrow's Schools.

Tomorrow's School's is not today's school system. I'm not sure who first thought of the name. It was the title of a government paper which was published in response to a report about school administration and the public consultation which followed the report. The new model of school administration which the government adopted in 1989 was in many ways a great change from what was there before, and the name Tomorrow's Schools has stuck to it. But schools today aren't the schools we planned in 1989.

Last year when I was invited to speak to the school trustees association I told the conference that it would be my last word on Tomorrow's Schools. I'm no longer a practising politician and I think it's time that other people had a turn. Occasionally I get ambushed on the subject. I usually find myself asked to defend features which weren't any part of the original scheme. I accepted the invitation to give this lecture tonight partly, I have to say, because I'd like the chance to make that point.

It certainly isn't the whole reason for my being here. I'm here because I don't believe that we're making the best use of our education resources. We're not making the best use of the energy and enthusiasm of parents, teachers and academics. I'm like any other parent in this country. I want the best in our schools. I'd like to see a wide public debate about how we get the best, not just in schools but

everywhere in the education system. This lecture is my contribution to it.

Now I come back to Tomorrow's Schools. The scheme which carries that name is a plan of education administration. It doesn't have anything to do with what is actually taught in schools or who is competent to teach it. It's a management model. I had an interest in it as a politician because the way we manage our schools, or the way we allow them to be managed, is always going to make a critical difference to who gets what in education.

Here I have to make an openly political statement, because it's fundamental to what I hoped to achieve when school administration was remodelled in 1989. I believe in equality of opportunity in education. In the compulsory sector this means that all students who go to school should have an equal chance of getting a good education, whatever their ability or aptitude, and whatever disadvantage they may be facing elsewhere in their lives. It follows that I don't believe in a market model of schooling. Markets are made by winners and losers, and I don't believe we can afford to have losers among our schools. I think it's wrong that the quality of children's schooling should depend on the size of the parents' income. It's unfair to children and it damages our society to write people off educationally. I think that people should be able to send their children to private schools if that's what they want, but they should pay the whole cost of it.

I have to emphasise that equality of opportunity in schooling doesn't always mean uniformity of provision. What works in schools in a small town in Northland isn't always going to work in schools in a small town in Southland. Schooling which suits children from prosperous and literate families won't do justice to children from a different background. This point was fundamental to the original model of Tomorrow's Schools. While it was designed to give parents and the school community a voice in their children's education, it depended equally on the government making available the resources which would ensure equality of educational opportunity. It is here, and I shall come back to this point, that the failure of government has been greatest and most damaging.

You'll understand from this that the original model of Tomorrow's Schools, while it asked schools to manage themselves, didn't ask schools to become competitive. In fact, the scheme set up barriers and disincentives to competition, almost all of which were removed by later governments.

The model itself was the product of a committee of enquiry led by an Auckland businessman called Brian Picot. He is not the Roundtable kind of businessman. He has a longstanding interest in education and has freely given much time to it. The committee's report was in every way sympathetic to schools and the people who work in them. The words which most caught the public interest when the report was published in 1988 were "good people, bad system".

The report argued for a model of school administration which was as simple as possible, and in which decisions were made as close as possible to the point where they were carried out. It argued that there should be national goals in schooling, and that those goals should be clearly set out. Decision-makers should have full control over the available resources and should be held accountable for what was achieved.

This is what in broad terms the report proposed.

The school became the basic unit of education administration. Each school was to be funded by bulk grant, part of which would be set aside for teacher salaries. This latter part of the scheme has never been fully implemented. Each school was to be managed by a board of trustees consisting of elected representatives of parents, pupils and teachers, and the principal of each school. The trustees would manage the school in partnership with the teaching staff.

Each school would have clear and specific objectives, drawn up locally and resting on the bedrock of national objectives. These objectives were to be set out in the school's charter. The charter would serve as a contract and as the basis of the partnership between the government and the school and its community.

Each school was to be held accountable for meeting the objectives set out in its charter by an independent review and audit agency. This is the agency now called the education review office.

Community education forums were to be established to encourage debate about education issues and to channel public opinion into the government's decision-making processes. A parent advocacy council was to be established to promote the views of parents and to assist those parents who wanted schooling for their children of a kind which was within the national objectives but which the local school was unwilling or unable to provide. If at least 21 children were involved, the parent advocacy council could negotiate with the ministry of education to set up a new school or perhaps a school within a school.

The department of education was to be replaced by a much smaller ministry of education. It would not itself provide schooling. Its chief roles were policy-making and policy implementation. In other words it was to advise the government on its goals while making sure that schools had the resources of money, advice and assistance which would enable them to reach their objectives.

The report also recommended that an education policy council be set up, apart from the ministry, to bring a wider view to the minister of education and to make sure that the ministry's policy advice kept the confidence of parents, teachers and the public. This recommendation was not adopted by the government, although for reasons which will become clear, I now think that we should have adopted it.

It is hard to believe, in these cynical days, that the report was greeted with great enthusiasm, but that is exactly what happened to it. It offered a whole new range of possibilities for community participation in education. The government received about 20,000 submissions on the report in the space of six weeks.

There were two broad areas of concern. Teachers were anxious about the effects of local management on their conditions of employment. And there was also anxiety about the ability of parents to take part in the management of schools. Boards of governors had been managing secondary schools since about 1870, and I could never see why the parents of primary school children couldn't be

trusted to do the same. It was suggested that some boards might be captured by religious fundamentalists, or rednecks, or Maori activists. This has hardly happened, and the minister can dismiss a board if excessive zeal, or want of competence, leads it astray. It was argued that boards, especially in the beginning, would be called on for a huge voluntary effort. This I had to acknowledge at the time, because that was what happened. I can only pay tribute here to the many thousands of people who willingly accepted the challenge and became trustees.

I don't want to go into the detail of the model. All I should say is that the government in large part adopted the proposals of the Picot report, and in turn published its plans in the paper called Tomorrow's Schools. The new scheme took effect in the latter part of 1989.

It is a devolutionary model of school administration. Devolution in my book does not mean leaving schools to their own devices. Tomorrow's Schools was designed to be a partnership between the school and its community on the one side and the government on the other. The school and its community would give its students the best possible chance to learn. The government would provide the resources and a supportive national infrastructure. The partners had an equal stake in the success of every school. I shall come back later to the subject of what happened when one of the partners lost interest.

At the heart of the new model was the ideal of the community school. Schools were to be managed locally and democratically so that every school could become the best school it could possibly be.

It was not intended that schools should compete with each other for students or for resources. The scheme in fact did not allow for competition. The device it used to make sure that schools were based firmly in the local community was zoning.

Every school was obliged to have a geographic zone around it and to accept every student who lived in its zone. If it had spare places, these could be filled by students from out of the zone, but they could not be filled at the discretion of the school. They had to be balloted. It didn't matter if your father and grandfather went to the school, it didn't

matter if you were an academic high achiever, it didn't matter if you had the makings of a Silver Fern. If you lived outside the zone, you couldn't get a place at the school unless you won it in a ballot.

Zoning was an essential element of the scheme. If you're a parent, I believe that you're entitled to know you can trust the local school to do the best that can be done for your children. You can get involved in its management if you really want to be sure. Equality of opportunity in schooling demands that every school is a good school. It can't afford to have winners and losers. The zoning scheme was designed to direct the efforts of all concerned into making every school a winner.

The new model was never intended to allow schools to fail in favour of other supposedly better schools. We know that some schools have a harder job than others simply because of their location in areas of poverty or other disadvantage. The original scheme had sophisticated mechanisms for quantifying educational disadvantage so that the government could fund schools to compensate for that disadvantage. When the education review office was established, one of its duties was to audit the effectiveness of the government's performance in the allocation of resources. At the same time, the parents advocacy council was set up to assist parents who did not feel they were getting a good deal from the local school. The council's response might be as simple as alerting the ministry of education to a problem or it might be as complex as setting up a new school or school within a school.

This model of school administration was subverted not long after its birth.

The ballot for places in out of zone schools proved very unpopular. It was especially disliked in middle class suburbs where it was the practice to send young people to fashionable schools elsewhere in the town. These suburbs were among the natural constituency of the government which was elected in 1990. With a great deal of fanfare about parental choice, the new government put an end not only to the ballot but also to zoning.

This decision, more than any other, set schools up to be winners and losers. Parents were free to withdraw their children from what were seen to be bad schools and enroll them in what they hoped might be better schools. And if this in itself was insufficient to encourage schools to compete for pupils, the new government endorsed competition as a means of improving performance in education. The sophisticated funding mechanisms which were intended to compensate for educational disadvantage were deliberately blunted, and such as remained were blurred even more by reductions in funding. It was the number of students in the school which really counted.

I don't think the government ever formally instructed the education review office not to review the government's performance as a funder of schools, but in practice the office has chosen not to. On top of this, the new government quickly put an end to the parents advocacy council and the community education forums. If there were deficiencies in schools, they were in future to be overcome by the market mechanism.

Schools are as a result under enormous pressure to compete with each other for students and resources. The results for the goal of equality of opportunity in schooling are almost wholly unfortunate.

The first point which has to be made is that parents and caregivers can't always get the choice of school they want. It isn't always practically possible to send your child to another school. There may be only one choice. And even where there is more than one school, the power of choice actually rests with the school, not the parents.

Schools which are popularly known as good schools are able to pick and choose among students. It was this, incidentally, which finally led the government to reintroduce a modified zoning scheme. The member of parliament for Epsom, who represents parents in what real estate agents used to call the grammar zone, threatened to vote with the opposition to restore zoning. Regulations now allow the ministry of education, in consultation with schools, to impose a zoning scheme. What happens in practice makes the drawing-up of electoral boundaries look principled. The choice of out of zone students remains with the school.

The end of zoning led some schools to adopt a spurious commercial culture and to market their services. Others had to do the same when their rolls began to fall. Some schools which were losing numbers in desperation dumbed down their curriculum to make results look better. There are schools which put huge resources into cultural events of limited educational value, because success in them is thought to bring prestige and attract students. It's a dog eat dog environment, in which commercial imperatives drive the education agenda.

It's a vicious circle. When a school gets a bad name, it's hard to turn it around. When numbers fall, and the best among potential students stay away, a school doesn't easily climb out of the hole. If a school gets a good name, it attracts funding and the kind of students who will add to its good reputation. The school wins. Education loses. Equality of opportunity in education is eroded. The country loses.

The original model of Tomorrow's Schools, I emphasise, did not allow for some schools to fail in favour of other, supposedly better schools. It did not assume that in some schools human resources and expensive plant would be underused while other schools were bursting at the seams. It accepted that there would be poorly-performing schools. They were to be identified and their failings were to be remedied. Today we've arrived at the point where the minister of education has at last recognised that schooling in parts of Northland, South Auckland and the East Coast is in a state of crisis and has somehow found the money for an attempt to repair the damage. That money, I have to tell you, was set aside for remedial work ten years ago. A new government thought it had better uses for it.

What has happened to our schools is of course entirely in tune with the commercialisation of the rest of the public sector. Continuing efforts to create, for example, what its designers call an internal market in health services are testimony to the government's determination to apply commercial disciplines to the provision of public services. The story of Tomorrow's Schools and what happened to them cannot be separated from the history of public sector restructuring.

Most of us who formed the government which took office in 1984 were seized with an instinct to modernise. Like almost every modern government, we were preoccupied with efficiency and getting value for money. In those terms, the old public service didn't offer a particularly good defence of itself. I don't think that anyone should be nostalgic about it. It wasn't in any way an effective tool of government.

When I became minister of education in 1987 I couldn't believe what I found.

The Picot report called the education bureaucracy a creaky, cumbersome affair, in which any sense of an overall plan, if it had ever existed, had long since been obscured. The minister of education was formally responsible for what happened in the schools. In practice this meant that I used to get papers which asked me to approve the installation of temporary classrooms. With the best will in the world, this was beyond my competence. The old department of education was a bureaucratic labyrinth. School principals used to have to get the department's approval for a new colour scheme. The mountain of detail meant that nobody was actually responsible for anything.

The centralised nature of the system meant that educators had little to gain by co-operation with local communities. The Picot committee found many parents who were concerned about the performance of the local school but were quite unable to pin down anyone in the system who could or would take responsibility for it.

The organisation defeated the best intentions of the people who worked in it. Lines of authority were blurred. Communications were poor. Goals were unclear. Without clear goals, nobody could properly be held to account. In the absence of any other star to steer by, the rule-book became the guide-book.

You didn't have to be an economic rationalist to find this disconcerting. The evidence of administrative paralysis was overwhelming. The old model was indefensible. Earlier attempts to remodel it had been ineffective. The new model of Tomorrow's

Schools was deliberately designed to be a radical departure in education administration.

The model was designed, let me say, to meet more than one objective. First of all, it had to answer the need for reform. It also had to be robust enough to achieve what advocates of the market model claimed could be achieved by the commercialisation of public education. I'm not going to tire you or myself with an account of the policy battles which put an end to the last Labour government. All that has to be said here is that at the time of the Picot enquiry, opponents of the commercial model were very much on the back foot. Tomorrow's Schools for that reason had to counter the claim of the economic rationalists that the administration of education is bound to be unresponsive and inefficient if its provision isn't subject to the discipline of individual choice.

I have to accept that because it was a devolved scheme of administration it was comparatively easy for a later government to enhance the competitive element. If you have self-managing schools there is inevitably a risk that the entrepreneurial or profit-seeking side of our culture will assert itself over concepts of fairness and social responsibility. It's also fair to say that the removal of layers of education bureaucracy was a strategy very much favoured at the time by the Treasury, because it calculated that community education forums and boards of trustees were not going to be a significant force in future battles over education policy or resources.

The teacher unions at the time argued that the commercialisation of schooling was the aim of the reform. It was not my aim, and it was not inevitable. It was the result of a political choice by another government. I regret that we didn't do more in 1989 to entrench the non-competitive elements of the scheme, but I can console myself with the thought that the presence of boards of trustees has at least spared schools from the more bizarre experiments in commercialisation to which hospitals have been subjected.

The part played by political choice is plain enough when it comes to the government's own agencies. Here the partnership between the government and the school and its community which was the

foundation of Tomorrow's Schools has been conspicuously neglected.

The new model of school administration purposefully loaded a great weight of work on to schools. The responsibility of the government was to provide resources and a supportive national infrastructure. It's worth noting that the Australian states which adopted a devolved scheme of school administration employed large advisory services to help schools in making the change and to help schools which found themselves in trouble later. These safeguards were and are essential. In this country, they have been dismantled.

Some part of this, it has to be said, was the result of massive funding cuts imposed on the education portfolio in 1991. Much of it is deliberate. If you believe in a market in education, and believe that good schools will drive out the bad, there is little reason to devote resources to improving performance in bad schools. In this context, the frequent passivity of the ministry of education in the face of school failure becomes wholly explicable.

As far as I know the ministry has been through three major restructurings since 1989, and several smaller ones.

It has as a matter of policy become a hostile environment for staff who identify with the education sector. Collaboration with practising educators is actively discouraged. Indeed, the present government's longest-serving minister of education saw the collaborative relationship as harmful. He believed that it worked against the exercise of parental choice in schooling. His was the time when compulsory teacher registration was done away with and teachers as a matter of policy were removed from the ministry's consultative processes. It might be added that any possibility of a productive relationship with the teaching profession was also done away with.

One especially damaging step was the closure of the ministry of education's small regional offices. Schools lost contact with officers who could reasonably be expected to know local schools and their special circumstances. The closure of these offices further undermined the collaborative relationship between schools and the ministry.

The original scheme of Tomorrow's Schools did not anticipate that the ministry of education would become a spectator. It did not expect the ministry to abdicate its responsibilities. But that is what happened. I can't imagine what led the ministry to decide that a country with a compulsory school system didn't need a national scheme for detecting and dealing with truancy. I can't imagine why it didn't think schools needed clear guidelines for suspending students or even clear guidelines for the physical safety of students. The laisser-faire approach must have fitted the ministerial view of the benefits of competition in education. These decisions, and crackpot schemes like the plan to let schools set their own holidays, have all since had to be revisited.

Here is another critical issue. Bad decisions like the decision to tolerate critical school failure in places like Northland, South Auckland, and the East Coast, have been reversed by later ministers. The difficulty is that the ministry cannot cope with their reversal. In its uncertainty about its goals, it mirrors the ambivalence of its political masters. It long since shed the staff who understood, to give just one example, why truancy mattered and how it could be dealt with. In this and in many other areas it had to reinvent the wheel. As each new problem or political issue arises, a new procedure, often at odds with an existing procedure, is scrambled into place. School principals rightly complain about the avalanche of paperwork.

There were numerous additions to the ministry's functions when the present deputy prime minister was minister, and today's ministers are just as likely to ask for immediate action in response to some particular problem. This places an almost intolerable burden on the few senior staff in the ministry who are actually competent to deal with education issues. As a result its interventions are clumsy, uneven and uninformed.

A devolved scheme of school administration, competitive or otherwise, does not allow for active intervention by the minister of education. I certainly didn't want to meddle. I wanted to make the decisions which were properly the responsibility of a politician, like how much money could be spent and what in the broadest terms it

should be spent on. I wanted to leave decisions about schooling to people who actually knew something about it.

Ministerial detachment is even more a requirement of a commercial model of the public sector. Ministers in the commercial model are the purchasers of departmental outputs, and must rely on commercial disciplines to ensure efficient performance. They are certainly not supposed to meddle in the working of the market. But our many ministers of education do meddle. It is hardly surprising that the ministry of education is dysfunctional.

The ministry is in no way a suitable tool for intelligent intervention, but ministers have insisted that it intervene. I don't know if they've lost the courage of their free market convictions or the penny has finally dropped that the competitive model of schooling isn't fair and doesn't work. It doesn't matter. The point is that ministers have tried to take control in a scheme of administration that isn't designed for them to take control. The result is a shambles in policy and performance.

This to me is a very great loss. We've given away equality of opportunity in schooling for the shyster democracy of the marketplace. We've asked teachers and trustees to carry on while the government turned its back on the partnership which was at the heart of Tomorrow's Schools.

I now come to the last point I want to make tonight.

None of what happened was inevitable. What happened is a product of political choice, and it can be undone if there is the political will to undo it. If there is a firm political commitment to remove the competitive element from school management, then it can be removed, if that goal is kept in sight. It saddens me to hear, as I do from time to time, that bulk funding, or the future of the education review office, are defining issues between the parties in the debate about schooling in the general election. To say that is to obscure the critical issue, which is surely the choice between a competitive model of school management and a collaborative model, or, as politicians would probably put it, between freedom of choice and equality of opportunity. The rest is detail to be settled in light of the greater goal.

I remain an advocate of the devolutionary model of school management. Our self-managing schools have been asked to cope with administrative incompetence, political sniping and uncertainty about funding. The wonder isn't just that most of them have been able to soldier on in a hostile environment. It's that we have many remarkably good schools which are humane places where learning is valued.

We are in some danger in this country of being engulfed in a tide of cynicism about politics and the political process. But there is little room for cynicism in the concern that parents and caregivers have about the education of their children. Their participation was the keystone of Tomorrow's Schools. We haven't fully tapped that resource and I believe that we should.

I don't doubt that the first step to take in eliminating the competitive element from the model is to return to a scheme of geographic zoning for schools with a ballot to fill any spare places. It would be critical to encourage, or give schools some incentive, to return to working in a collaborative manner. I'm sure now that we made a mistake in the original scheme of Tomorrow's Schools when we insisted that every school be managed independently through its own board of trustees. It suits most schools, but some are too small or too isolated or too poor to get the best results. I don't see it as detracting from the democratic element if boards with common interests co-operate up to and including amalgamation.

I'm frankly not sure what should be done about the ministry of education. If it couldn't be remodelled to make it fit for a constructive partnership with self-managing schools, then you'd have to start again with a new agency. There's a case for creating an independent body to advise the minister on policy. Policy-making in recent years has suffered from the fragmentary or even contradictory nature of the advice being offered and it would be useful to have an overview.

I don't agree with the argument for merging the education review office with the ministry of education, although I can understand why the case is made. In a competitive model of schooling, the office's reports inevitably give substance to the idea of winning schools and losing schools. In a collaborative model, the office's reports become

an essential element of accountability. It's sadly true that the office has often identified failing schools only for nothing to be done about them. That is the responsibility of the ministry, a responsibility which the ministry has neglected. I'd rather see the ministry put right than the education review office folded into the ministry. It would almost certainly lose its essential character of a watchdog.

But all that, as I said, is detail. Can I say to you now that I have said what is really my last word on the original model of Tomorrow's Schools. I hope that it lives to see another day. It was a breath of fresh air and it shouldn't be left to the history books.