# Scenario Modelling for the Future of Schools

Reflecting on the uses of OECD's Future of Schools Approach to Planning.

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In its 2001 volume, *What schools for the future?*, the OECD attempted to project a number of scenarios for the future of schooling. This type of scenario planning is useful (indeed almost normative in strategic planning), as it provides a systematic sense of the vectors and forces at play in bringing about one future or another. It is particularly helpful in the Australian setting, where we have mixed systems, negotiated from time to time between state and federal authorities. Unpicking one of these scenarios gives us the grounds for analysing some of the forces at play in our own situation. The OECD contribution is important, as most advanced nations benchmark their work/policy against OECD norms. When Australia is looking at the Finnish model, for example or at models from United States, the perception is not purely bilateral. Underpinning both the observer and the observed are the assumptions of the OECD. The political/economic values which underpin this analysis, also raise questions for Christian schooling around the world. As such, it provides a Procrustean bed for public policy formation. In order to appear useful, Christian schooling organisations need to be able to answer the questions which come out of such developments. Their attempts to become participants in "the public good" defined by such political/ economic models are thus coopted by the assumptions buried in "the good" so defined.

So let's take the first of the scenarios suggested by the OECD in 2001 – that **Robust Bureaucratic Systems** (RBS) will continue to dominate National education systems. (See *Illustration 1*) The assumption here is that a large statutory or technical bureaucracy will feed resources, standards and policies (outwards) and demand compliance and reporting (inwards) to be assessed against political criteria. The relationship will be one of reporting and compliance in exchange for funding. There are also (in this scenario) significant assumptions about the nature of bureaucracies –Max Weber, for example, saw bureaucracies as core to the rise of the West, and so a positive thing. This positive view of bureaucracies has faded over the years, in particular with the rise of individualism and the decline of a sense of "public service" among the general population. Attempts to professionalise, even politicise, the public service in various state systems has resulted in a decline in confidence in the ability of bureaucracies to deliver what "the people" actually want. The work of that other Weber disciple, Robert Bellah, on mediating institutions is salutary in this particular regard.[1]

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[1] Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Illustration 1:
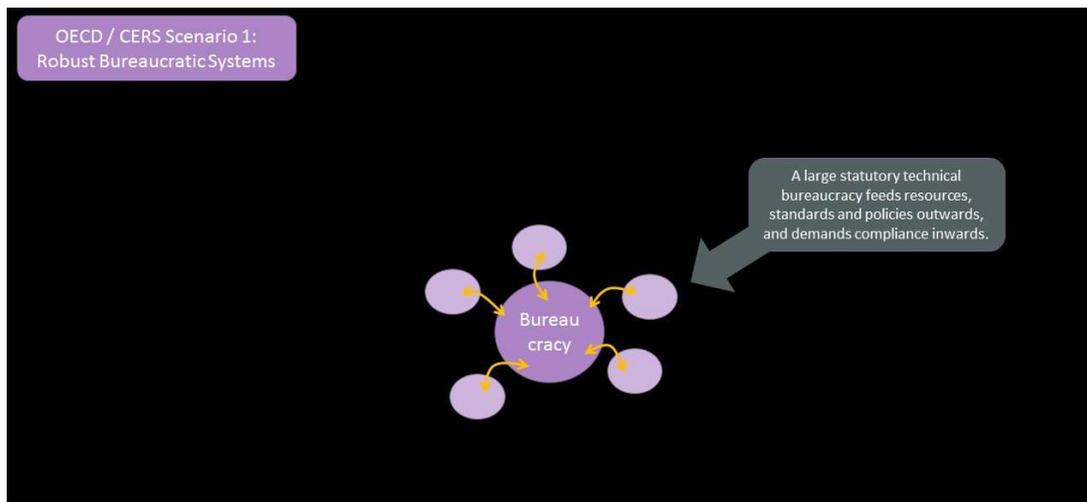
Forces for Convergence (stasis)

The OECD analysis is essentially a form of systems analysis, positing forces for *convergence* (or stasis) and forces for *divergence* (or change). There are thus not *two* sets of forces, but *three* in play, in ways which make systems like bureaucratic systems unstable in their ability to sustain long-term educational outcomes. Forces for convergence are in tension with forces for divergence, but both are acting upon the bureaucracy itself which will shift with regard to the status of that tension. Some of the forces of convergence include bureaucratic inertia, cultures of expertise, social effectiveness, the state of national disposable income, the perceived exchange value of certification, professional resistance to change among both bureaucrats and the teaching force, and the orientation of the market towards either past models or towards a safety orientation with regard to their children (who are, after all, their guarantee of a future). Bureaucratic inertia was explored by Weber's disciple, Thomas O'Dea, who explored this sort of tension in his explanation of five institutional dilemmas.[2] A technocratic bureaucracy will tend to see its job as a matter of processing existing systems. They have a certain amount of self-interest, which fixes their job self-description towards maintaining or improving their own positions. Therefore the bureaucracy will tend to grow rather than decrease, because bureaucracies cannot act against themselves. Entangled in systems of legislation, public practice, and industrial awards, the bureaucracy becomes an institution in itself and (despite broader discourse for change) will tend to sustain the status quo in which its interests are embodied.

Often the way of bringing about change within a bureaucracy is to hire consultants or to bring to bear **experts**. Those experts, of course, are largely trained within the same systems as the bureaucrats, and in many ways are in fact themselves members of the same class. That is the nature of expertise – it is defined against the technical norms administered by the

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[2]   Thomas F. O'Dea, "Five Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion,* 1.1 (Oct., 1961): 30-41.

bureaucrats. The calling of a Royal Commission, therefore, or the involvement of high-level consultancies (such as the "big five" accounting/ strategy companies), will produce large reports, even larger bills, but often very little change. The purpose of the process, after all, is to *maintain* **bureaucratic inertia**. Instead of being agents for change, therefore, cultures of expertise tend to be exercises in compromise, oriented towards producing the **minimum permissible change** within the tension described by forces for divergence.

Bureaucracies are also defined by the degree to which they are seen to support **social effectiveness**. Maintaining the perception that the existing system remains socially effective – by, for example, producing data which demonstrates incremental rather than revolutionary change, or metrics which are self-referential in demonstrating social effectiveness (that "90% of parents feel that" the system is working) also continues to reinforce the bureaucratic norm. Whileever there is a body of consensus that a school system is working – even though in fact the thing it is producing is not the thing for which it is designed – essentially reinforces the bureaucratic norm. The OECD's Scenario 1, takes this into account. Schools, the CESR team notes, perform a great many functions which are not specifically about curriculum or classroom matters. These include:

- o looking after children,
- o providing protected space for interaction and play,
- o socialisation,
- o sorting and selection

Illustration 2:
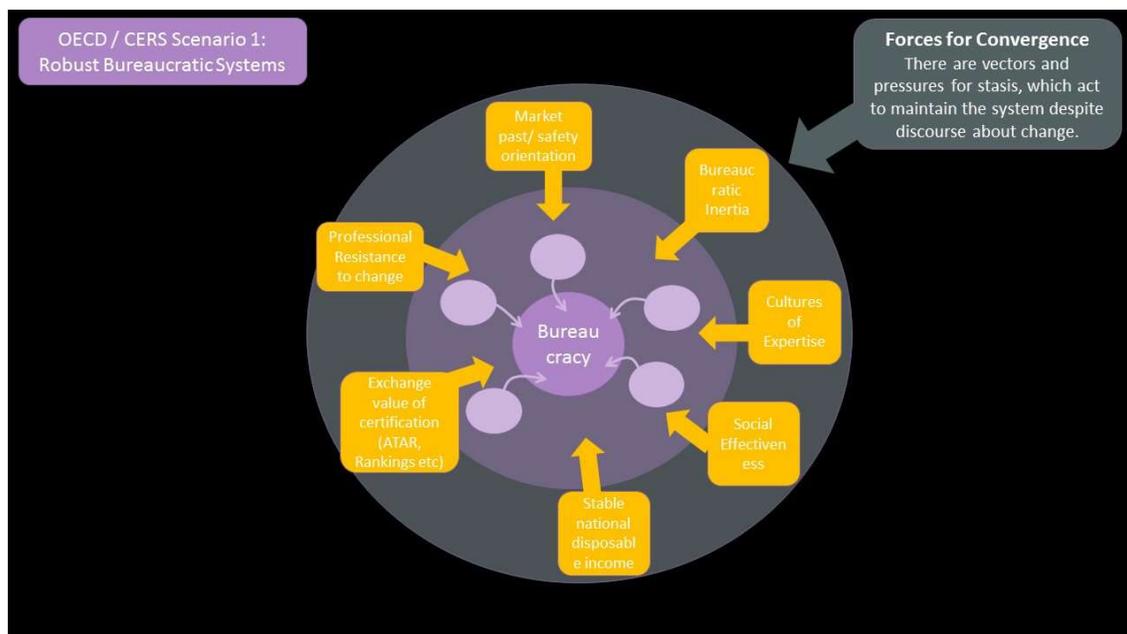
While these core (if hidden) objectives are being met, there is a tendency to assume that learning is also taking place. International tests, such as PISA, demonstrate that the cultural

setting, in which such compromises are taking place, has a significant impact upon actual learning outcomes.

Sustaining advanced bureaucracies also requires a significant amount of public funding. Whilever **national disposable incomes** are stable, and no great additional demands are placed upon the public purse (such as a war, natural disaster, et cetera), then bureaucracies tend to be sustainable. In periods of rapid political change, where increased income is not achievable, arguments for a smaller state, and therefore a smaller and more affordable bureaucracy, come to the fore. This tends to be tension between small state/big state political dualities – as is the case, for example, between Republicans and Democrats in the United States.

The public also has to continue to believe in the **exchange value of the certification** provided by the state. There is constant jockeying with internal calculations relating to ATARs, school rankings, NAPLAN reports, et cetera, because such things essentially constitute artificially-manufactured currencies which schools and other institutions are encouraged to trade for greater public recognition, funding, access to student enrolment markets, et cetera. These currencies do not float in a free market, however, as they are controlled by bodies dominated by bureaucrats and members of the culture of expertise.

The very size of the schooling market also produces a workforce which is self identifiably professional. The professionalisation of teaching since the end of World War II has been one of the really transformative elements in Australian society. The schools workforce moved from being a relatively marginal, semiprofessional body, trained in institutions outside the formal university system, to rapid professionalisation through the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s when the CAEs were finally co-opted into the university system, they brought with them the certification regimes which have been developed in order to professionalise teaching, allied health, policing, and other semi-professions. The teaching profession has always had a significant say in the operations of the state bureaucracy, to the point that a reformist New South Wales government in the 1970s had to detach its new Higher Education Commission from schools operations, because the latter were essentially run according to agreements between the teachers unions and the Public Service Union. These bodies acted to ensure that only incremental change was possible, and *that* within guidelines which did not permit fundamental changes to work conditions, professional recognition, *et cetera*. The next 30 years in New South Wales educational history were essentially a struggle between what has been called neoliberalism in the political sphere, and professional resistance to change in the school sector.

The latter was sustainable, of course, whilever the broader body of parents/guardians benchmarked their expectations against the education which they themselves had experienced. Whilever the market was oriented towards safety, or towards past models, the status quo of handing responsibility for education off to state bureaucracy was maintained. As a new, post-baby boom generation, has entered the parenting/guardianship space, however, these assumptions have come under question. Their own comparatively unstable job expectations raises questions about what can be expected for their children. The relationships with their children, too, have been less stable, reflecting rapidly changing family structures and economic opportunities.

Forces for Divergence (Change)

Each of the forces for convergence, however, is in tension with counterbalancing forces for change. Bureaucratic inertia, for example, is in tension with the four-year political cycle, and the need for political parties to demonstrate that they are 'doing something'. In a modern society, the purported value of change is high. Politicians therefore need to address it, within democratic processes, while at the same time recognising that both the relatively short term of the political cycle, and the embedded power of the bureaucracy, will subvert change. The institution of 'the leaked report', by which public servants seek to control politicians, and vice versa, is sufficient evidence of this. **Cultures of expertise** also contend against broader forces which undermine received opinion. The stark difference between the blanket acceptance of a doctor's opinion, and the culture of "the second opinion", with the consequent rise in medical malpractice rates, also demonstrates this process. At the same time as there is increasing reliance upon cultures of expertise to stabilise bureaucracies, therefore, there are also contending forces of populism and deprofessionalisation. These are made particularly effective by the advance of media technologies, and the omnipresence of an acid, public media culture, which justifies itself by defining its purpose as one of 'holding the public figures to account'. (The decline of Fairfax, and its shift away from the extreme left in recent months, has been a direct result of being caught in the conundrum of having to *define* the criteria to which they have held other public denizens, and of being held accountable by their readership to those same criteria. Having questioned and undermined everything, one is left with the logic of one's own *reductio*).

Illustration 3:
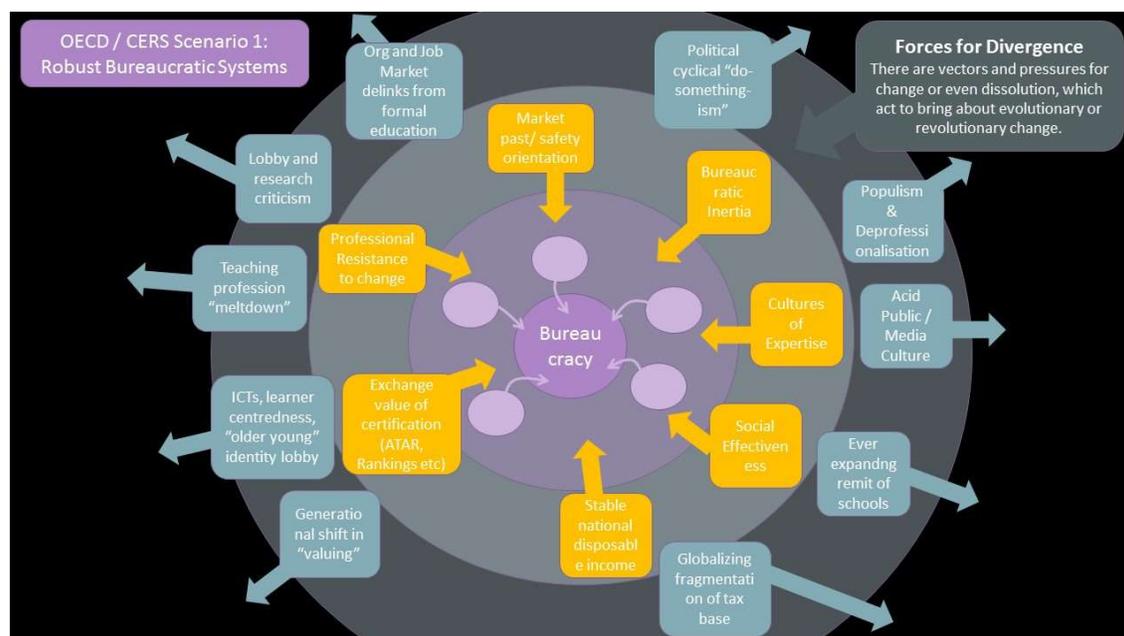
The ability of the bureaucratic centre to sustain the perception that its operations address **social effectiveness**, moreover, is likewise undermined by its very success. The success of schools, relative to the decline of other social institutions, has left them subject to an ever

expanding remit as they attempt to take on many of the social functions previously fulfilled by families, community groups, *et cetera*. Government bureaucracies cannot fulfil the functions of mediating institutions, and therefore need to create (or coopt) suitable mediating channels which articulate their positions into the public. Eventually, the ever-expanding remit (as we have seen in the Safe Schools debate) undermines the effectiveness of the school in performing its core functions – both the explicit functions and the hidden functions noted above. One of the factors undermining the teaching profession, after all, is the complaint that they are expected now to do the work of parents who fail, police who require mandatory reporting, the community figures which used to be the common property of growing up in less highly concentrated urban settings, *et cetera*. The in-cycle demand for compliance and reporting fragments the functions of the school, as these outweigh the out cycle distribution of resources. In short, an unchecked Bureaucracy in a time of shrinking resources tends to cannibalise its members. The perception of social effectiveness thus becomes less sustainable even as the school becomes more important to its fragmenting communities.

And this *is* a time of shrinking national disposable income. Australian governments have always seen education as an easy mark in terms of cost savings. Higher education is easier again, but schools have often experienced new programs which essentially simply move resources from one place to another without marked improvement. Defining a mechanism whereby the demands of the bureaucracy, the demands of its related profession and infrastructure, the expectations of parents and students, and the budget cycles of nations are in balance, has proven a difficult point of compromise to find. The globalisation of commerce, the decline of local industry and so regional autonomy, has meant a globalising fragmentation of the tax base. The sustainability of the bureaucratic approach to schooling, therefore is brought into question in direct relationship to a nation's ability to consolidate its tax base. Debates about the banking sector, about the tax contributions (and mobility) of large multinationals, about elite schools, *et cetera*, are really thus about the sustainability of an old model of education contingent upon a core bureaucracy. These are, needless to say, the defining debates of the day in our public sector.

At the same time, the exchange value of what the bureaucratic schooling system has to offer has been continuously undermined by the changing values and identities of generations, facilitated by changes in communications technologies, a shift towards learner centredness, and the increasing presence in schools of what the OECD study calls "the older young" (that group of people who in previous generations would probably have been in workplaces or apprenticeships, but who are now legislatively required to stay longer and longer at school). These people find navigating the tensions between their own sense of independence, a cultural construction of an earlier and earlier adulthood, and a later legislative construction of continued 'studentship', quite difficult. With the growth of social media, in particular, this latter has become an effective identity lobby with whom politicians attempt to connect. Even though they may not yet vote, their identity as a target market for consumer media makes them a consideration which often pulls against bureaucratic norms.

And while the teaching profession may be resistant to change, the OECD study demonstrates that they are not immune from the effects of criticism. Lobby groups and the shift towards

evidence-based policy-making, has meant that teachers have been under pressure not just (from the centre) by increasing compliance regimes, but also from interest groups who wish to use schools as a means of social engineering, by changing or embedding particular ideologies or approaches in the curriculum. Whether the relatively limited rewards and slow progression rates – compared to other professions – are 'worth it' is thus a common conversation amongst teachers, who find themselves in tension between their commitment to particular groups of children in their classrooms, a relative alienation from the core bureaucracy, and in professional tension with external lobby and research groups. All of this connects to what the OECD study refers to as a possible teaching apocalypse, or "meltdown". In this scenario, intergenerational patterns within the teaching workforce, connect to growing alienation and declining perceived rewards, to produce a flight from the profession (or at least an unsustainable degradation of new candidates in the profession relative to losses among ageing and retiring teachers at the other end). The broader demographics of ageing Western populations, relative to the solutions (such as importing aspirational majority worlders, who prefer to enter professions which are less Anglo-centric and better paid than teaching) continue to fuel the fear of such a meltdown.

Finally, in terms of **forces for divergence**, there has been an observable detachment of organisational and job-market training from formal educational settings. While this tends to happen at university level (with high-level criticism emerging from multinationals in particular as to the suitability of applicants for positions in, for example, customer-side occupations), the consequence for schools is that they need to reorient themselves towards *multiple* educational settings. This fundamentally undermines the value of the ATAR, for example, as universities are no longer the only pathway to employment. The bureaucratic educational system, however, is by definition not well connected to the job market, exacerbating the delinking effect between what schools teach, the metrics/currency established by the bureaucracy, and the expectations of the job market. All of this places pressure on the default orientations of parents/guardians, who are caught in the tension between their own ideas of a safe educational path, and those being defined by the market.

Conclusion:

Australian states exist in a mixed model of education, functionally between OECD Scenario 1 (**Robust Bureaucratic Systems)** and OECD Scenario 2 (**Extending the Market Model**). The value of looking at a single scenario, I hope, has been demonstrated by this paper. While each of the vectors deserves more detailed treatment (particularly at the local level – the existing OECD process targets nations and systems), the OECD scenario system does enable the **isolation of trends**, and an assessment as to what degree these are present in Australia. Secondly, it **simplifies the heuristic** to the extent that the interplay between the core model, and the forces for convergence/divergence, becomes more apparent. The drivers behind much of the public debate about education in Australia thus also come to the surface, providing the leaders of Christian schools with an ability to explore the definitions of "the good" which each of the models implicitly defines.

In a robust bureaucratic system, the core "good" being defined essentially works to the benefit of institutionally embedded elites. High-stakes testing, which produces rankings,

metrics, and the like, and "expert cultures", must thus sometimes be seen as a mechanism for creating controllable markets for exchange. From a theological perspective, Christian schools need to assess what is being bought and sold, and what values are inherent in rampant competition the end of which is in fact aimed at sustaining the system which Christian schools were brought into existence to challenge. For some time, Christian schools have been able to take advantage of the fact that they can, because of their sense of vocation and connection to local community, deliver services at marginally more competitive rates than public schools. In other words, what government is *buying* by providing resources is not necessarily what Christian schools are *selling*. One might expect that, as it comes under greater stress, robust bureaucratic systems might well seek to find further resources by leveraging their compliance and reporting powers in ways detrimental to the Christian schooling sector.

All of this implies the need to be proactive in policy formation at the very highest levels, and to engage with educational bureaucracies in ways which do not require the cooption of the local school as a mere mechanism for social engineering. Christian schools need to be energetic in defining their own purpose, in generating their own "expert" and "research-driven" cultures, in shaping public opinion as to what their benefit it, and in generating sources of support which are not reliant on the regional RBS. They also need to connect to the emerging occupational space, and take seriously not only where their students come from, but where they are going to.

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