The Catholic Campaign for State Aid

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE GOULBURN SCHOOL STRIKE 1962

"If the children simultaneously presented themselves at the various public schools of our State, the good, courteous headmasters would be rather nonplussed. Even our agile politicians would have on hand a problem that fine speeches would not solve."
- Bishop Terence McGuire, addressing the Goulburn Holy Name Society, 1948.

When Premier Brand of Western Australia had agreed, in 1960, to press the Prime Minister for more Commonwealth education funds on behalf of non-State schools, he had warned that there was little chance of success until agitation came from the major Eastern States of Victoria and N.S.W. Victoria quickly organised a militant campaign, as has been shown. The question for these States was: when was N.S.W. going to lend its weight to the pressure on Canberra? The answer from the Sydney organisation was leave it to the bishops. This response was unsatisfactory to the militants in other States. It was also unsatisfactory to militants in N.S.W. The evident division of Catholic opinion on tactics had an obvious effect on the response of politicians to the various pressures for state aid.

The 1962 State election was the first in N.S.W. for many years in which state aid was an issue. Unlike the later elections, State and Federal, of the 1960s, where the issue became an auction in which Catholics were encouraged to choose the better package, the 1962 State election was a completely negative affair for Catholics interested in education. Both the Labour government and the Liberal-Country Party opposition were trying to convince voters that no deals had been made. No deals had been made. Catholic voters had no reason to believe that either party was sympathetic to their cause. It was a climate in which the politics of frustration was likely to appear more satisfying to Catholics than the politics of negotiation. This was the situation in



the Catholic community of N.S.W. when, in July 1962, the events in Goulburn hit the headlines of newspapers all over Australia.

It is ironic that, in N.S.W., where the bishops placed so much confidence in administrative concessions, it should be bureaucratic insensitivity which sparked off the most spectacular demonstration of Catholic frustration in the history of state aid. The plot of the Goulburn school strike has all the elements to make it a highly successful comedy series on Australian television: _there were the bumbling bureaucrats, embarrassed and buck-passing politicians, a country bishop at the head of a townful of indignant Irish Australian Catholics, a St Trinian's-style use of schoolchildren to invade the public schools, and it was the state of the lavatories which began it all! It was not at all funny in 1962.

The central figure was Bishop John Cullinane, an auxiliary to Canberra's Archbishop Eris O'Brien. Cullinane had been ordained a priest in Sydney in 1944 after being recalled from studies in Rome at the outbreak of War. As a young priest, he served an episcopal apprenticeship as private secretary to Cardinal Gilroy. He then returned to Rome to complete his interrupted studies before returning to be appointed auxiliary bishop in Canberra-Goulburn diocese in 1959. In 1962 he was still very young (in his early forties) to be an Australian bishop. He took up residence in Goulburn while Archbishop O'Brien lived in Canberra. He had not been a member of the hierarchy during the traumatic years of the split in the A.L.P., and he did not share the phobia of public controversy which characterised most. N.S.W. bishops. He did not fit clearly into either faction of the Australian hierarchy; he had been a protege of Cardinal Gilroy, yet he had no reason to see any great profit to his Church from the N.S.W. Labour

government. He was a quietly spoken and shy man who was always seen by his fellow bishops as a loner. Behind his gentle demeanour there was a very strong will and a single-minded determination.

The other personality occupying the centre of the stage in the Goulburn affair was Brian Keating, a local dentist. In 1962 he was
38 years old, with four children, living in an ordinary Goulburn bungalow. He was an independent alderman on the Goulburn Council and, at the time of the school protest, he was deputy mayor. He was one of the natural leaders in the Catholic community in Goulburn, with a talent for organisation and propaganda. He claims that in 1962 he had no political allegiances, but it seems clear that his sympathies were not with the N.S.W. Labour government. Not only was he an independent alderman in a State where 'independent' in local government usually denotes 'anti-Labor', but he was to stand as a Liberal Party candidate for the Legislative Assembly in 1965 and for the Legislative Council in 1972. He was to remain a central participant in

state aid politics. Had there been no split in the A.L.P. in the 1950s, he would probably have been a successful right-wing Labour politician, for his political style fitted that tradition.

The events which led up to the closure of the Catholic schools in Goulburn were a curious mixture of a long, drawn-out correspondence and a very short, unpremeditated, popular response. The correspondence began in July 1957 when the N.S.W. Department of Education issued a Certificate of Efficiency to Our Lady of Mercy Preparatory School in Goulburn - subject to the provision by the school authorities of an extra seat in the boys' toilet. In August 1957, the Department made enquiries and received an assurance that such improvements were planned. In February 1958 the Department enquired about progress. There had been none. Nevertheless, in November 1959 the Department issued a new Certificate of Efficiency valid for a further two years - till 31 December 1961.

Meanwhile, in 1959, John Cullinane was appointed as bishop in the diocese and took up residence in Goulburn. As Parish Priest, he was responsible, together with his Administrator, Father J. Keogh, for the
. fabric of the parish schools. The matter dropped out of sight for two years. However, in December 1961 the Education Department took the very serious step of withholding the Certificate of Efficiency until it should be notified that extra toilet facilities were really going to be provided. The school principal replied that they would be provided when school finances improved. This was not acceptable. The Department of Education notified the Department of Public Health, who notified the Goulburn City Council about the state of the lavatories in the school. In March 1962, the Goulburn Council required the school to provide extra facilities before June or face penalties of £20 plus.
£5 per day. Brian Keating, Deputy Mayor and prominent parishioner, had discussed the matter with Bishop Cullinane. The bishop had genuine difficulties with finance, as had most administrators of Catholic education in N.S.W. The provision of extra facilities would have been difficult, but it would have been possible. Even one lavatory seat would have entailed considerable restructuring. But if such money were to be spent, there were many more needs that seemed apparent in Goulburn, especially with the great expansion of the secondary education sector in the colleges conducted by the Sisters of Mercy and the Christian Brothers.

There was no argument by Cullinane or any Church authorities that the State did not have the right to determine health standards in Catholic schools. Catholic schools had accepted (and even welcomed) State standards and local government inspection throughout their history. The complaint was with the style of bureaucratic interference rather than the content. The bishop resented having petty bureaucrats determine his financial priorities and threaten to close his school.

The resentment led the bishop to suggest that, if the State insisted on claiming the right to determine health standards, then it should be willing to share some of the cost of providing for them. Stated in this way, of course, the same argument could be extended to all supervisory requirements of governments at any level. Should government building inspectors subsidise the cost of extra foundation strength in private buildings? However, in the case of the Goulburn school, the argument was an emotional rather than rational one. There were already, for Bishop Cullinane, ample rational arguments to justify state aid. Meddling by petty bureaucrats merely made the situation of deprivation more galling.

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Bishop Cullinane and Brian Keating decided that the time had come to appeal to the politicians over the heads of the bureaucrats. In the presence of the local State M.L.A., L. Tully, an A.LP. member, the bishop told parishioners during a St. Patrick's Day speech that the school might have to be closed. The message reached Sydney very quickly and within a week, on 23 March, a Certificate of Efficiency was issued by the Minister till the end of 1962, pending advice that the lavatory facilities had been provided. To the bishop, this was simply postponing the problem and did not alter the situation. Keating appealed to the Premier through the mediation of Roger de Bryon-Faes, a Catholic Liberal M.L.C., requesting an interview. On 2 May 1962 de Bryon-Faes reported that both the Premier and the Minister for Education had refused to receive a deputation on the matter. To Bishop Cullinane this response was extremely provocative. It increased his resolve to fight to determine his own priorities in his own schools. More important for the future, it involved the leaders of the State in what appeared to Cullinane and Keating as a startling example of the injustice of State education policy: the State government could refuse to contribute financially to Catholic education yet still insist that Catholic authorities spend considerable sums of money in ways decided by the State, not by the Catholic authorities. How independent were the 'independent' schools? Should the State have financial power without financial responsibility? It was already a matter of state aid, not just the issue of lavatories in a primary school.

In May 1962 the issue had crossed the boundary that separates a
fight over details from a fight over principles. If the main problem was the bureaucratic insistence on a certain standard of sanitary provision, then it remained a problem where compromise was possible. It was, in fact, precisely the kind of problem that the Sydney organisation, with its contacts in the parties and the public service, had been solving without fuss for years. For Bishop Carroll it would have been simply the work of a few telephone calls. That was not the way Bishop Cullinane operated. The secular authorities went to work on his

behalf, looking for a loophole or a compromise that could keep the school open.

The Bishop decided that the school should close, since its facilities were not up to standard. If the State wanted the school kept open, let
the State pay for the improvements. He informed the Area Director of Education and Tully on 10 May that the school would close in the second term. The Area Director appealed to the Director General of Education. The Director General referred the matter to Goulburn Council. Tully wrote to the Premier and the Minister for Education. The deal that issued from this flurry of activity was an assurance from the Council that no action would be taken before the end of the year.

The time for deals was over for Bishop Cullinane. H? informed the Director General of Education that, since the school was inadequate in its health standards, it must be closed. Meanwhile Brian Keating had prepared a written appeal for state aid in the form of scholarship awards - a form acceptable to the A.LP. Federal policy - which Tully had presented personally to the Premier and the Minister for Education. Another deal was offered when two officers from the Health Department and the Council's Chief Health Officer suggested that the requirements were overstated because they had been based on total enrolments rather than the average daily attendance. The mayor tried to contact the Premier four times at the end of June and the beginning of July. Whether by inefficiency or design, the Premier could not be reached. It probably did not matter. Cullinane decided to press the issue to the point of crisis as a protest the whole attitude of the N.S.W. State government to Catholic education and as a symbol of Catholic frustration over the denial of state aid.

On 5 July Bishop Cullinane wrote to the Minister for Education informing him of a public meeting to be held on the following Monday (9 July) and inviting him to attend. He also sent a circular through the school inviting parents to the meeting. On the Saturday telephone invitations were given to about 60 Goulburn Catholic men to attend a preparatory meeting on the Sunday evening.

The preparatory meeting held at the presbytery on the Sunday (8 July) was a crucial one. Most of the men were at least partially aware of what had been going on, and they were angry. Over 40 of them attended the meeting. They shared with Bishop Cullinane the anger at the State politicians and bureaucrats who seemed to

be endangering their school. They shared the dissatisfaction with the 'official' Sydney approach to state aid, and demanded a more vigorous campaign for justice and equality. However, there was also a certain amount of anger directed at Cullinane and Keating - especially at Keating and at the prospect of closing just the one school. What was the logic of it? What were the specific aims of the exercise? Would the school remain closed? Was not that to accept defeat? Was it not a

situation in which the parish and the children were unlikely to win? Was not Brian Keating being rather cavalier in recommending the closure of the primary school when his own children were in the secondary schools? Was there not a suspicion that Keating was playing partisan politics and simply wanted to embarrass the Labour Government? The outcome of the meeting was the rejection of the Cullinane-Keating plan by the men. If there was to be a protest - and there was no disagreement on that - let it be a spectacular one, where the government would be in a no-win situation, where the duration of the protest was limited, and where there was no doubt about the aims. To close one school was to emphasise lavatories, and no one disputed the government's rights on health standards; the issue was state aid. The meeting decided to recommend that all the Goulburn schools should be closed, not just one. The schools should be closed for a limited period - for the rest of the term, i.e. 6 weeks. When the schools were closed, the children were to present themselves at the State schools demanding enrolment. In that way the State would be given a forceful lesson in the economics of state aid: the State could not manage to care for all children, so it was in the State's interest to keep the Catholic system alive. The meeting chose a steering committee of six men to organise the public meeting and direct the campaign. The Goulburn incident had undergone several fundamental changes. It had changed from a protest about bureaucratic harassment to a symbolic protest over state aid. It had changed from an episcopal affair to a layman's movement. On the next evening, it was to become a mass movement. On the Monday (9 July) circulars were sent through the schools inviting the parents of all Goulburn Catholic children to the meeting to be held that night in the Lilac Time Hall.

Bishop Cullinane had notified his superior, Archbishop Eris O'Brien, of the situation and of the prospect of closing the one school. The Archbishop expressed confidence in the bishop's ability to handle the situation in his own parish, but with the proviso that the parents would have to give their approval. Archbishop O'Brien was invited to the public meeting, where his presence added greatly to its importance. Bishop Cullinane could perhaps have been portrayed as a fiery hot head with no political experience or balance. This certainly could not be said about Archbishop Eris O'Brien.

About 700 people attended the meeting on the evening of Monday, 9 July. After Bishop Cullinane outlined the history of the dispute over the toilet facilities, the meeting proceeded to debate the decision to close the schools, and the motion drawn up by the steering committee appointed the previous evening.

This meeting of the Catholic community of Goulburn expresses its bitter disappointment at the failure of the State Governments - present and past - to recognise the justice.

of the claims of Catholics to a fair share of the public purse for its education system and wishes to draw public attention to the almost insurmountable plight in which Catholics find themselves. Recognising the need for emphatic citizen action to press the Catholic claim is urgent, we confirm and support the contemplated closure of the Catholic Schools in Goulburn as a token of our determination to have our claim recognised satisfactorily.

The debate was frank: united on the need for some drastic action but with a significant group reluctant to use children as the front-line troops. The motion was passed by the overwhelming margin of 550 to 120, at which stage Archbishop O'Brien gave his support to the action which had been decided by the laity.

Catholic opinion even in Goulburn was by no means unanimous. At the vital public meeting nearly 20% voted against the protest. It is reasonable to assume that many parents who did not attend the meeting had serious misgivings over the strategy. Nevertheless, the opposition never detracted from the remarkable

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strength of the protest. The main reason was that opinion in favour of the protest was more than four to one and that the protestors had strong leadership while those opposed to the protest had none. The secular press went looking for cracks in Catholic solidarity. During the first week, the Sydney Sun had a front page story on a local electrical engineer, W.E. Bolton, who had argued against the move in the public meeting and was willing to express his disapproval outside. By the second week, the same paper was able to report on the front page that "Parents Rebel" and suggest that the majority at the public meeting had manipulated the use of microphones at the meeting. The Sun was more accurate when it reported: "At first all Roman Catholic parents in the district - even those who personally opposed the ban - presented a united front".

On the following Friday, 13 July, the six Catholic schools in Goulburn were closed, and on the Monday, 16 July, the Catholic children (nearly 2,000) were instructed to present themselves at the State schools and politely request admittance. Priority was given to bursary students, and the other children were enrolled after ballots were taken at the State schools. On the Monday, 640 children were enrolled, leaving twice as many who could not be accommodated in the State schools.

Press reaction was immediate and nationwide. The daily press featured banner headlines and photographs of convent schoolchildren.

The letter pages in the following weeks contained almost nothing except opinion about Goulburn, state aid and blackmail. Editorial comment was almost universally hostile to the decision. In Sydney on 11 July, the Herald spoke of the Catholics as "demanding money with menaces";

The Telegraph called on the government to "meet direct action with direct action or else surrender to a pressure group"; the Sun cautioned that "under no circumstances must the State government - whatever may be the personal affiliations of its members - give way to this utterly unexpected form of direct action"; the Daily Mirror demanded that "the Goulburn School strike must be broken, firmly and swiftly". The reaction of the Catholic press was, naturally, friendlier. For the Sydney Catholic Weekly, the hesitations about confrontation and sectarian backlash which were the themes of Editor Kelleher's book Roman Fever and of an editorial two months later, were submerged in issues which highlighted the injustice suffered by Catholic parents. Cardinal Gilroy made a statement expressing sympathy, if not outright support, for the Goulburn parents.

If the Goulburn parents had wanted to draw attention to Catholic education by a public gesture, then they had been completely successful. They had certainly grabbed the headlines. The violently hostile press reaction was not part of the plan - although it should have been expected. Very quickly it became obvious to all participants that nothing could be achieved by closing the schools for six weeks that had not already been achieved immediately. It was also clear that there was no possible government response which would indicate the success of the demonstration. There was no explicit or detailed claim except "a fair share of the public purse". That was obviously a claim which could not be satisfied within the six weeks of the closure.

The following Sunday night, 22 July, the parents voted to re-open the Catholic schools and to continue the campaign through an organisation to be formed. The protest was over. Approximately 10% of the 640 Catholic children who had enrolled in the State schools did not return to the Catholic schools.

In succeeding chapters, the consequences of the Goulburn demonstration will be discussed. In this chapter, the concern is more about its origins and implications. How does it fit into the context of the Catholic campaign for state aid up to 1962, and what was the relationship of the militancy, which came to a head at Goulburn, with the political parties?

The Goulburn incident fits very clearly into the context of the increasing financial pressures on Catholic education. Throughout Australia, the system was on the verge of a crisis of survival. In this respect, Goulburn could have been almost any Catholic community in Australia. In fact, it was worse than most. That it was an educational centre for a large rural area meant that the pressures evident in the larger cities were intensified because of the closure of smaller Catholic schools in surrounding areas during the 1950s. It was a centre for boarding schools, where the financial pressures were even greater than in the more common day schools. In less than 10 years, the parish debt

had risen from a manageable £5,562 to an unmanageable £62,311. There were several unique aspects about the Goulburn

Catholic community. It was a very Catholic town. In the 1961 Commonwealth Census, Catholics were 36.2% of the population of Goulburn compared to an Australia-wide proportion of 24.9%. There

Was considerable lay resentment of the hierarchy's handling of the education problems. There was resentment of Sydney's lack of activity. There was also a special local resentment that so much of the educational

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resources of the diocese were being poured into Canberra. The secondary priority of rural areas was symbolised in the very name of the diocese: before 1948 it had been the Diocese of Goulburn; now it was Canberra-Goulburn. The startling postwar growth of Canberra had been met by the diocesan authorities largely at the expense of the rural areas of the diocese, and there was considerable feeling among Catholics in the country towns. The ambivalent support and attitude of the parishioners to the original Cullinane proposal is partly explained by this hostility to the authorities of the big cities of Sydney and Canberra. If the Goulburn incident fits into the general context of a Church under stress, it does not fit so well into the previous context of political agitation for state aid. There was virtually no connection between the origins of the strike and the militant sections of the Catholic lobby in Western Australia, Victoria or Wagga Wagga. In fact, when the Wagga men had approached Archbishop O'Brien earlier in 1962 for his support in promoting an active lay campaign, the Archbishop had firmly refused. Nor had the Goulburn men been involved in the Sydney campaign in any important way. The incident, quite simply, was the expression of frustration by an isolated Catholic community. The causes of the frustration were Australia-wide, but the nature of the protest was unique. The main precipitating factor was the personality and political inexperience of Bishop Cullinane, who was willing to let
the laymen of Goulburn mould the protest in their own way.

From Sydney Bishop Carroll phoned Bishop Cullinane on the day after the public meeting, advising him to have the decision reversed. "Bishop Cullinane told him to mind his own business", reported one of the Wagga leaders. In public, Cardinal Gilroy expressed guarded support, but privately he shared Bishop Carroll's horror at the turn of events. Archbishop O'Brien in Canberra had given his approval, but only after Cullinane had left him no room to manoeuvre without publicly repudiating his auxiliary in his own parish.

None of the political parties was involved in the Goulburn incident except through response to it. In origin, the protest was completely non-partisan. Insofar as the government of N.S.W. was the immediate target of the hostility, it was embarrassing for the State Labour Party.
But the Liberal-Country Party in Canberra was a very clear secondary target, especially as Canberra was the seat of the diocese.

The men of Goulburn who led the protest included well-known Labour partisans (such as Arthur Rolfe, who had been campaign director for the A.L.P.'s Allan Fraser) as well as sympathisers with the other main parties. There is no suggestion that opponents of the strike were motivated by any partisan loyalties. The issues were the principle of state aid, the financial crisis in the Goulburn schools, and impatience with governments of whatever complexion.

The political aftermath of the Goulburn incident is the theme of the following chapters. Goulburn in July 1962 stands at a watershed in state aid politics. It was the first major public confrontation in N.S.W. over state aid, introducing a decade when this was one of the most important domestic issues in both State and Federal politics. It marked the beginning of a new stage in the politics of Catholics and in their use of pressure. Breakthroughs in direct aid followed very quickly. 'Post' does not imply 'propter', but in any history of state aid the Goulburn incident must be given a central place.

It is not only in the history of state aid that the timing of the Goulburn incident was significant. In the history of the Catholic Church in Australia, Goulburn marked a key event in the changing relationship of clergy, and it coincided in time with the beginning of the Second Vatican Council in Rome, which gave a boost to the interest and involvement of lay people in the Catholic Church, and coincided with a remarkable development of Catholic interest in ecumenism and improved relationships with other Churches. Goulburn was a declaration of independence for lay political activity in N.S.W. which was nourished by the changing attitudes emanating from the Council and which began a very brief period of lay initiative in many Church-related activities. The failure of this spirit of lay initiative to survive is part of the state aid story in the decade from 1962 to 1972. As regards ecumenism, the Goulburn incident was initially a setback to the movement for sectarian harmony, yet the movements which issued from the event were to take the ecumenical ideal as one of their standards in a way which complicated the Catholic politics of state aid in important ways in the following decade.

One feature of the incident that was not given much attention, except by commentators hostile to the Catholic campaign, was the fact that a significant proportion of the children who enrolled in the State schools during the protest remained there at the end of the fortnight. In the long-term history of Catholic education in Australia, these children were symbolic of one Catholic reaction to the problems of Catholic schools which may yet prove to be more important than the agitation for state aid. In 1962, there were 70% of Catholic children in Catholic schools in N.S.W./ A.C.T.; by 1972, this had declined to 54%.

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