



**THE LEARNING OF VALUES**  
**MEMORIES OF STRATHFIELD NORTH PUBLIC SCHOOL**

**The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG\***

Strathfield North Public School on Concord Road in Sydney was not my first school. The first time I met a teacher was Mrs Church. Suitably enough, she was a kindergarten teacher in the school conducted in the Church Hall of St Andrew's Anglican Church at Strathfield. Church and hall are still there on the corner of Parramatta Road and Concord Road. The year would have been 1944. The Second World War was still in its full fury.

Mrs Church was a tall, spare, very fair skinned woman with red hair and freckles. A pure Celt - she looked like not a few of my relatives - high cheek bones and ever smiling eyes. She encouraged her charges

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\* Justice of the High Court of Australia. Strathfield North Public School 1945-1948.

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in moulding objects with plasticine; singing; dancing and endlessly enjoying themselves. This I did with gusto.

The only thing she took most seriously was the annual concert. This was a huge enterprise in which children, their parents and Mrs Church were bound together in frenetic energy. I do not actually remember my own performance in the concert. It must not have been a memorable one. But I do recall the performances of my siblings under the bright lights of the stage in the Church Hall with Mrs Church looking distracted and desperately anxious as the children went through their routines, fluffing their lines; forgetting their songs..

When 1945 arrived, it was time for me to leave the kindergarten and to attend the local public school. My parents decided that I should go to Strathfield North PS on the corner of Concord Road and Correys Avenue. There, in a large campus was an infants' school and, across the playground, the "big school" to which I could aspire.

The infants' school was housed in a double storey building. It was constructed of strong materials, probably in the 1920s. The year is doubtless somewhere on the façade, facing Links Avenue. And so it was that I was deposited up the stairs in first class, into the tender care of Miss Pontifex.

I have spoken so often about Miss Pontifex that she became something of a heroine at Macquarie University. At almost every

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graduation ceremony when I was Chancellor of the University, I called on the graduates to remember *their* Miss Pontifex. When I left the university, I received an inscription, written in Latin, calling to mind the impact on my education of *Ponteficia maxima*. As I was to discover not long after infants' school, the Pope of Rome is known as Pontifex Maximus to his followers.

Miss Pontifex was a large, stout woman who wore her hair in a bun. She was somewhat severe and ran a class of strict law and order on the upper floor of the infants' school. We sat in seats that were arranged, fixed to the floor, with inkwells and grooves in the much carved wooden surfaces all facing the blackboard and, of course, Miss Pontifex.

I recall two things about her classroom. On the blackboard was an inscription of the alphabet printed in chalk in clear script. This was the serious business - to learn to read and write. So from Miss Pontifex I acquired the basic windows into the world of learning. I will always be in her debt.

We received books illustrating the alphabet. I can still remember thinking how beautiful the letter "a" appeared - with its curves and elegant roundness. "A" was for "apple". And so my education started.

We would walk down to the school assembly and walk back again up the stairs to the tune of the *Teddy Bear's Picnic*. I can recall the

smell of the alphabet book. In war-time there was little high quality shiny paper. But somehow, approaching the peace, we students were issued with books that smelt nice. The smell of glossy paper is something modern day students taken for granted. But not the war children of 1945. This was the beginning of my time at North Strathfield Public School.

In second class my teacher was Mrs See. She continued the process of instruction began by Miss Pontifex. Reading was a public activity. All of us were expected to stand in our place beside our desks and read a section of the departmental syllabus book, issued each month for the students in public schools at that time. There was no nonsense about it. Games and play were important. But so was excellence in reading, writing and arithmetic. Mrs See did not quite make the same impact on my mind as Miss Pontifex. But she is remembered as a faithful teacher of the boys and girls in her class.

The year 1947 dawned. It was then that I went to the "big school". I entered the low slung verandah and brown coloured building that is still there facing Concord Road. I was replaced in the infants' school by my brother Donald who walked with me to the school every day. Not in those days parents dropping off their children in four-wheel drives. Instead, we walked to school, about one and a half miles. And it was good for us. If we had not spent our play money on lollies that ruined our teeth, we sometimes caught the 459 double-decker bus on Concord Road at the bus stop across from the top of Sydney Street. At first the

buses were red but later they appeared, newly minted in colours of green and yellow. For the ride we paid a penny and sometimes we had to show our school passed. We were deposited at Correys Avenue. Parents and schoolchildren acted as safety wardens to see us safely across the road. Concord Road was pretty quiet in those times. I remember the khaki trucks going along the road with big Red Cross in a circle of white, on their way to the Repatriation General Hospital at Concord. At one stage I have a dim recollection that Mrs Roosevelt came past our school. But perhaps that is a trick of the memory. On Victory in the Pacific Day we were all lined up along Concord Road in front of the school, to cheer the Governor-General, the Duke of Gloucester, also on his way to the hospital where our brave soldiers were being cared for. We waved flags - both Australian flags and the Union Jack. We were constantly told of how lucky we were to be British - living in Australia, a free land that had fought for its freedom.

The teacher in third class was Mrs Godwin. I recall that her first lessons concerned the beginning of human civilisation. She took us back to the Rivers Tigris and the Euphrates, to the scribes in Ancient Egypt and to the way these stories related to the biblical stories we were learning at Sunday School. In accordance with the *Public Education Act*, our education at North Strathfield was "free, compulsory and secular". But that did not stop us inter-relating ancient places to the Bible story. And on Fridays an Anglican Minister came to give Scripture instructions. There were no School Prayers as such. But there were photographs of the King, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. At

important assemblies we sang the National Anthem, "God Save the King" at important assemblies.

Our classroom, with Mrs Godwin, was in the building facing Concord Road. Now it is a room with a bank of computers. Then, we sat in our fixed desks. We continued the instruction in reading and writing. Inkwells were found in the desks. From time to time they were filled with departmental ink. It was always a watery navy blue as if diluted to save costs - for these were hard economic times. The War had meant national and personal hardship and Concord was not a suburb of the rich. We were issued with wooden pens and nibs also supplied by the Department of Education. With a new nib, it was necessary to suck the tip in order to start the ink flowing after the first dip. Somehow, I acquired a pen with a bubble within glass that moved up and down as I wrote. Not for us the printing writing of the later biro generation. We were the last to learn copperplate writing. To this day I still struggle with the beautiful sloped writing in ink that Mrs Godwin taught me.

I recall that we used a book with a red cover and a title like "The Commonwealth Atlas". It has pictures of the world in maps. It showed the British Empire, in red, of course. It always seemed frustrating to me that the line of red from Malaya to Burma was interrupted with a streak of yellow for the unconquered part of independent Thailand. In my mind, inspired by marvellous stories of Imperial heroes, I occasionally conceived the idea of leading an expedition to conquer the Thais and

secure red from Singapore to the Khyber Pass and red from Capetown to Cairo.

These were days in which we were taught to be proud of our British heritage. We were Australians. But we were also British. If I performed particularly well in the class (a constant endeavour it became) a crown was put in my exercise book. It was a red version of St Edward's crown. This was the crown of the British Empire. It showed particularly good work and everyone knew what the crown meant. I would show my parents, at home in Sydney Street Concord, the copybook studded with crowns. Getting a crown became my daily ambition.

In 1948 I progressed around the corner of the school building to the first classroom facing Correys Avenue. Here, I passed into the hands of Mr Casimir. He was a man of medium height and somewhat gaunt expression. I suspect that he was one of the older generation of teachers, like Mr Buckle in the next classroom, brought back to school teaching because of the demands of the War on younger men.

Mr Casimir was quite a disciplinarian. Giving the cane was quite a common feature of the boys' classes in those days. Whereas the infants school had been co-educational, when we arrived at the big school we were divided into boys and girls. The boys had the southern wing. The girls, with the redoubtable Miss Prescott, had the northern wing. Rarely did the twain meet, except in the playground. A form of severe

punishment for boys was to be sent to stand in the corridor of the girls' school for all the girls to see. It never happened to me - but it was regarded as worse than capital punishment by those who had to wear that ignominy.

Mr Casimir gave many boys the cane; but never myself. I must have been a somewhat precocious child because I can remember nothing about playing in the playground. Only about sitting in the classroom soaking up knowledge from Mr Casimir. On the front wall, in the corner nearest Correys Avenue, above the blackboard, was a large broadcasting speaker. It carried the wireless programmes that were used in public education at that time. In the mornings we had a broadcast by H D Black - later Sir Herman Black - subsequently Chancellor of the University of Sydney. I can recall him telling us of the advance of the communist Red Army in China and the ousting of the KMT regime under Chiang Kai Chek. Then, later in the day, we would have singing lessons from Terrence Hunt. He had a lovely baritone voice, full of joy and especially the joy of singing: "Hello girls and boys. Good singing" he would wish us - and then we would learn a new song. Often they were the lovely traditional English songs, such as "The Ash Grove". Or hymns such as "These Things Shall Be" by John and Charles Wesley. They were beautiful songs and we sang them with children's enthusiasm. The words were found in the departmental syllabus magazine which we received every month. When I went home I would sing the songs to my mother. She made me sing and sing again

a song with Scottish words - it reminded her of her father who came from Ulster.

Later, when I was Chancellor of Macquarie University, I procured a recording the voices of H D Black and Terrence Hunt. Sometimes I would play them to the graduation ceremonies of the University. Terrence Hunt was teaching "The Blacksmith". You could hear his pure voice and his piano. It is still in my mind.

One day in the middle of the year 1948 two men in grey dustcoats came into the class with a pile of papers. These were intelligence tests. Every one of us had to fill them in. Some of them related to words and mathematics. Others related to patterns and designs. Innocently, I filled them in. We all did, not knowing what they meant. But now I had reached one of those turning points in my life. Later my parents received word that I had to go to the Department of Education in Bridge Street, Sydney to undergo a further elimination test. These were further IQ tests used in New South Wales public schools to stream children with high IQ results into the special Opportunity C classes. I was selected. And so my time at North Strathfield Public School came to an end at the close of 1948. I transferred to Summer Hill Opportunity School. I had to walk to Strathfield Station and take the train to Summer Hill. The process of maturing and growing up was underway. It was quite a ting to travel alone by train from Strathfield to Summer Hill. But it was perfectly safe. The trains ran on time.

Mr Casimir never caned me but I later found that he gave my brothers a hard time. Donald was left-handed and efforts were made to get him to write with his right hand. My mother went up to the school and confronted the teachers demanding that they allow Donald to write left-handed. And so he did and does to this day. David, under Mr Casimir, was constantly being told that he was not up to the standard that I had set. He had done well in third class. But my mother was ill when David was under Mr Casimir's care. He must have suffered some form of depression for the absence of our mother in hospital. Mr Casimir tried to encourage him with the cane, a most unwise thing to do in David's case.

Mr Casimir was not all bad. Well in advance of his time, he taught us in fourth class about the evils of smoking. It was a constant theme of his. It was unusual and memorable because such instruction was so rare at that time. My grandmother, Normie, smoked. But my parents did not. I did not really need Mr Casimir's instruction. Yet, years later, when I made my first furtive experiments with cigarettes, I am sure that my rejection of the weed was, in large part, because I felt Mr Casimir was standing nearby, brandishing his cane.

I remember the school friends of those days, three of whom, Ian Coughlan, John Maitland and Graham Packett, accompanied me on a return to Strathfield North School in August 2005. There were other friends, Peter Stinson, David Pickering and Bobby Chong. Whatever happened to these friends of far away post-War days?

On one occasion I came second in the class under Mrs Godwin. When I told my mother she asked who had come first. "Bobby Chong", I announced. My mother let me know that next time I was expected to come first. It was not imperious and certainly not punitive. Simply expectations of excellence. Bobby Chong, I learned, went to New Zealand where he taught in a university. It would be interesting to know what happened to all those children sitting in front of the photograph with John Maitland holding the slate for Third Class 1947. In those days, some came to school without shoes from The Home, a nearby orphanage and refuge for under-privileged children. Some, like me, were sent off to school with peanut butter or cheese sandwiches wearing ties. That was the minority. But whether with ties or shoeless, we sat together as equals in the same classroom. We became friends and we shared life as young Australians. We learned the basics of education, without any discrimination. We were not there because of any particular religion of our families or because our parents were wealthy and could send us there. We were there because we were equal, growing up in Australia, learning our lessons from fine and dedicated teachers and also from each other.

The values I learned in public schools in Sydney in those days, and especially in the formative years at Strathfield North Public School have stayed with me all my life. On my return to the school in August 2005, the School Captains and Prefects (an innovation from my day) sang the new School Song. It was mainly about being kind to each

other and getting on together. Perhaps this is more necessary today in the less homogeneous society of the 21st century. In my day, the School Song was full of verve, confidence and ambition. It planted values that I will have. It called on analogies from sporting prowess and encouragement to each of us to maximise our talents:

"Let us march in unison; let us do our best  
Face the world with eagerness; willing to stand the test  
So here we are, side by side  
Sturdy and strong together  
Play the game. On to fame  
Strathfield North forever".

Consider the values involved in these words. Unity in diversity. Striving for excellence. Facing the world and its tests with equanimity and eagerness. Standing side by side. Being fair and playing the game. Not bad values - in 1948 or in 2005 I suggest.

The spirits of long remembered school friends and of Miss Pontifex, Mrs See, Mrs Godwin and Mr Casimir are with me every day of my life. The democratic values I learned with them are also with me. They affect the work I do as a judge. My admiration and gratitude for public education where we learn and played together as equals has never left me. Looking back and looking around at the current world the notion of education that is free, compulsory and secular seems to have a large contemporary, even heightened, relevance. I never cease to say my thanks to my teachers and to public education. It readied me for a life of responsibility. It imprinted a democratic attitude on my mind and in my heart. In the words of the motto of Strathfield North Public School,

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I am still playing the game of life: striving, facing the test, in company with other Australians in this fortunate land of sunshine and endeavour.



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