

Understanding and overturning educational disadvantage in the Huon Valley

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Executive Summary

The average NAPLAN scores for students in rural areas of Tasmania is considerably lower than their counterparts in city and suburban schools. The results for students at the two high schools in the Huon Valley, Huonville High and St James College, can be four years behind city schools. This is not because the kids are dumb, teachers lazy, or the principals slack, but is due to long running intergenerational social and educational disadvantage.

Households in the Huon are markedly poorer than the average Tasmanian family, that in turn are much poorer than households across the whole of Australia. Poor families with parents with lesser education, makes for low socio-economic schools, that consistently perform well below the national average. This disadvantage is compounded by the distance schools in the Huon Valley are from urban and metropolitan areas. Collectively these inherent disadvantages are responsible for lower levels of achievement, a fact endorsed by educational commentators and extensive research in Australia and overseas.

Exacerbating these lower levels of educational performance in the Huon, with a total population of about 1900, is the fact that many hundreds of children from (presumably) better off Huon families are sent to schools in Kingston and Hobart. This further reduces the socio-economic status and hence student performance of both high schools in the Huon. Added to this, for the state as a whole, Tasmania's level of achievement by the end of Year 12 is much lower than students in all other states of Australia.

It is understandable that parents want the best education possible for their children – even if it means travelling several hours a day to and from school. But unless there is an enormous shift in consciousness by decision makers, education in the Valley will not lift student attainment so that they can continue to further education, and richer, more meaningful lives. Already more is being spent per student by governments at both of the Huon Valley secondary schools than at schools in Kingston and Hobart but students are lagging far behind their counterparts.

Based on the understanding that 'it takes a village to raise a child' it is strongly recommended that a broadly based task-force is formed and empowered to spearhead the reforms necessary to raise educational performance in both secondary schools in the Valley. This would be a pilot project in the Huon Valley, continuously assessed and evaluated with a view to introducing similarly structured task-forces to other regional areas of Tasmania in the future. The **Huon Task-force for Educational Renewal** would be chaired by a locally respected 'elder', and include high level local representation from the Huon Valley Council, health services, business, early childhood education, post compulsory education, social services, housing and social services, and educationalists, with progressive evaluation undertaken by UTAS.

The overall aim of the Taskforce would be to transform the two local high schools to become educational facilities that are at least equal to schools in Kingston or Hobart. Local schools need to become 'schools of choice' for parents and students - regardless of family socio-educational standing. Despite the best will in the world, the current high schools are not serving children in the Valley well, leading to inequity and further generational

disadvantage. This must change and this Inquiry is the opportunity to put in place something truly meaningful.

Introduction

The discussion paper 'Rethinking School Buses', Circular Economy Huon, (2024), identified that there are many hundreds of children travelling by bus (and private car) out of the Huon Valley each day to attend schools in Kingston and Hobart. This means those children staying in the Valley attend schools with decreasing enrolments that are less well resourced with reduced numbers of teachers, including teachers with specific subject knowledge, with fewer teachers' aides and less money for capital equipment and consumables: i.e. they are educationally disadvantaged.

This paper will look at the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) scores for students in the Huon Valley and selected other regional schools and compare them with students in Kingston and Hobart. It will show that students attending regional schools in Tasmania achieve lower NAPLAN scores than their counterparts in more urban and metropolitan schools. Regional disparity and disadvantage is one of the reasons that Tasmanian students perform poorly compared to other states and the ACT.

Reference will be made to the high level of educational inequity in Australia compared to most other OECD countries and to how this helps to explain why and how educational disadvantage is happening in regional and rural Tasmania. It will conclude with a recommendation about how education in the Huon Valley could be improved.

1. The framework for assessing educational advantage and disadvantage

The Grattan Institute's, *'Widening gaps: What Naplan tells us about student progress'* (2016) by Goss and Sonneman, identifies three factors that significantly impact students' progress:

- a. Students from low education parents make less progress than those from medium and high education parents,
- b. Students from low education schools perform worse than their peers in high education schools, and,
- c. Schools in metropolitan areas (of Victoria) perform much better than schools in country areas.

All of these factors have relevance for explaining student performance in schools in the Huon Valley and other regional areas of Tasmania and are briefly discussed below.

The measure of parental education is another way of looking at the socio-economic status of a family. Research has shown that children with parents with low education are disadvantaged and have lower levels of achievement by Year 3, and this disadvantage increases as the child moves through school. Goss and Sonneman found that for students with low education parents who were ten months behind their peers families in year 3, the gap had widened to 30 months by year 9.

There is an overlap between low education parents and the education level of a school – the school level is a measure of all the parents in the school and is assessed through the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), produced by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority¹. ICSEA is "*related to certain characteristics of the student's family and school such as parental education and occupation and school characteristics such as location and socio-economic background of the students it serves*". The overall rating goes from a low of around 500 to 1300 with 1000 being the median.

The third factor leading to widening gaps in performance between students, according to Goss and Sonneman, is the distance the school is from a metropolitan centre. Their report was based on Victoria but their analysis is supported by the work of Emeritus Professor John Halsey, (2018) who specifically examined the educational challenges and barriers that impacts learning outcome in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia.

Sections 2 and 3 will look at how the three causes of disadvantage outlined above play out in the Huon Valley and elsewhere in regional Tasmania.

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https://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/Guide_to_understanding_2013_ICSEA_values.pdf p1.

2. Educational disadvantage in the Huon Valley

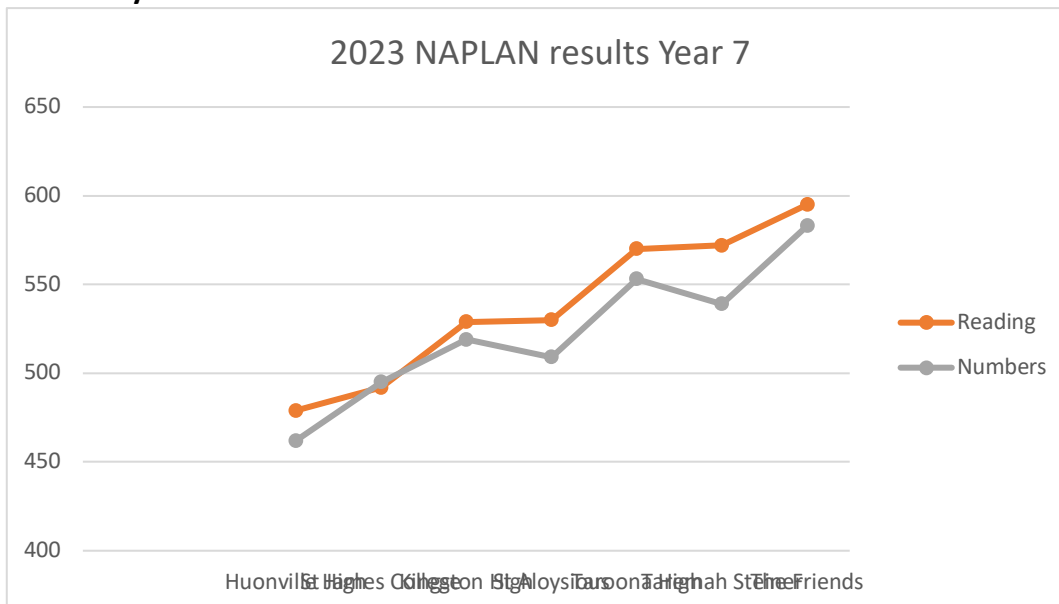
Table 1. and Chart 1. below lists selected schools, enrolment numbers, the ICSEA rating, and Reading and Numbers NAPLAN results for students in the Huon Valley, Kingston and Hobart in Year 7. It shows that the scores for students at Huonville High and St James College in the Huon Valley are significantly lower than their counterparts in Kingston and Hobart. This is consistent with all three findings of Goss and Sonneman related to parent education, the educational level of the school and the distance from central Hobart.

Table 1. 2023 NAPLAN results for selected high schools in the Huon Valley, Kingston and Hobart - year 7

School	Enrolments	ICSEA Rating	NAPLAN scores	
			Reading	Numbers
Huonville High	315	889	479	462
St James College	226	889	492	495
Kingston High	617	989	529	519
St Aloysious	1113	1027	530	509
Taroona High	1159	1114	570	553
Taremah Steiner	245	1127	572	539
The Friends	1257	1152	595	583

Source: My School website

Chart 1. 2023 NAPLAN results for selected high schools in the Huon Valley, Kingston and Hobart – year 7



The Reading scores range from a low of 479 at Huonville High School to a high of 595 at Friends school in Hobart, a difference of over 100 points. The range is similar for Numbers.

Table 2 and Chart 2. is an analysis of Year 9 NAPLAN results for students attending selected schools in southern Tasmania in 2023. The range of results is similar to the year 7 results.

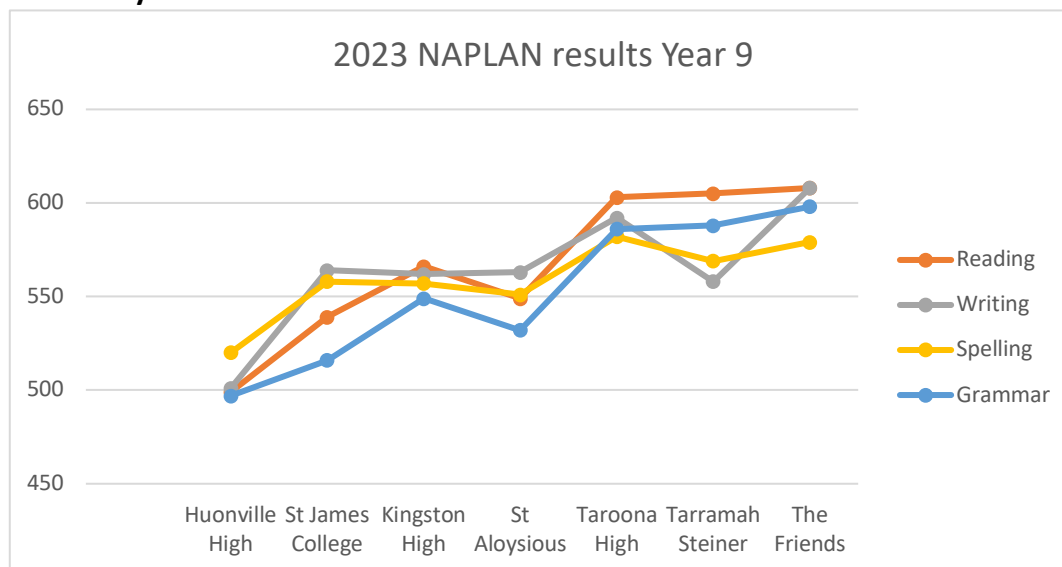
Comparing the results between Year 9 and Year 7 one can see that the results for Reading and Writing for both schools in the Huon Valley is lower in Year 9 than for all other schools listed in Year 7 – a two year gap. Email correspondence with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) pointed to a gap of 4 years (or greater) for Reading between Huonville High School in Year 9 and The Friends School in Year 5.

Table 2. 2023 NAPLAN results for selected high schools in the Huon Valley, Kingston and Hobart - year 9

School	ICSEA Rating	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar	Numbers
Huonville High	889	499	501	520	497	501
St James College	889	539	564	558	516	542
Kingston High	989	566	562	557	549	548
St Aloysious	1027	549	563	551	532	540
Taroona High	1114	603	592	582	586	584
Tarramah Steiner	1127	605	558	569	588	556
The Friends	1152	608	608	579	598	608

Source: My Schools website

Chart 2. 2023 NAPLAN results for selected high schools in the Huon Valley, Kingston and Hobart – year 9



2.1 Low parental education

The assessment of parent education is a way of looking at comparative family advantage and disadvantage. It is also pertinent to look at comparative income levels. The 2021 ABS Census data shows that people living in the Huon Valley municipality are less well off than either elsewhere in Tasmania or across Australia. In round figures, personal weekly incomes are \$600 in the Huon Valley, \$700 for Tasmania and \$800 for Australia. In terms of family income, Tasmanians overall, are around \$200 better off a week than households in the

Huon Valley and Australians are \$600 better off. Residents of the Huon Valley are considerably poorer than the rest of the state and the whole of Australia.

In terms of parent education the best figures are, again, from the 2021 ABS Census. This records that 20.1% of Huon Valley residents had achieved a bachelor degree or higher compared to 21.9% elsewhere in Tasmania and 26.3% across Australia. It shows that the number of people completing study to the level of a bachelor's degree or higher is only marginally lower in the Huon Valley than elsewhere in Tasmania but much lower than for the whole of Australia. However it is hard to disaggregate the total number of people with degrees from the number of parents with degrees whose children attending schools in the Huon Valley. There are over 600 students whose families live in the Valley but who attend schools outside the Valley and 195 children being educated at home². More highly educated parents are more likely to have the resources and aspirations to send their children to schools outside the Huon Valley or educate them at home.

Based on both the average incomes and apparent parental education level for students studying in the Valley it is likely that they experience a considerable level of disadvantage compared to other areas of Tasmania and Australia.

2.2 Relative advantage/disadvantage of schools

The rating of disadvantage in a schools is relatively straight forward as there are ICSEA levels attributed to all schools – a measure of socio-educational advantage. As Tables 1 and 2 show, the ICSEA rating for both schools in the Huon Valley, Huonville High School and St James College are 889 – well below the average level for the country, of 1000. The figures for Kingston High School is 989 and St Aloysius College, 1027. Taroona High School, Tarremah Steiner School and The Friends school in Hobart are all over 1100 – considerably higher than schools in the Huon.

The span of NAPLAN scores in Tables 1 and 2 shows a significant correlation to the geographical location of the schools. Schools in the Huon Valley, furthest from central Hobart have the lowest scores, Kingston schools are mid ranking, and Hobart schools have the highest scores. It is recognised that the tables are not an exhaustive review of the link between geographical location and student performance in southern Tasmania but the figures are consistent with the research of Goss and Sonneman.

2.3 Geographical disadvantage

The educational disadvantage experienced by those living in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia is well recognised. At the request of the then federal government, Professor John Halsey, 2018, specifically examined the educational challenges and barriers that impacts learning outcomes in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia. The report recognised that student performance in these areas lagged behind that of students living in urban and metropolitan areas based on NAPLAN and the Programs for International Student Assessment (PISA). Professor Halsey also noted that the disparity in performance in regional and rural areas applies not only in Australia but also to the USA, Canada and other OECD countries: i.e. it is a universal 'truth'.

² Office of the Education Registrar, (June 2024) – Personal email correspondence

Compared to the vast expanses of land across northern Australia there are few if any communities in Tasmania that are truly remote. But there are many areas that are regional and rural including the Huon Valley, Tasman Peninsular, and the Derwent Valley in the south of the state.

3. Educational disadvantage in other regional areas of Tasmania.

In this document the results from other regional areas of Tasmania cannot be compared by all of the criteria applied to the Huon Valley. The level of parent education has not been researched for each school and the number of children being home educated and bused beyond the local high school is not known. However there are two measures that can be used: each school's ICSEA rating is provided through the My School website and they are all outside urban and metropolitan centres.

Results for the selected schools in Tables 3 and 4, years 7 and 9, show a reasonably close correlation between the ICSEA rating and the NAPLAN scores. The results are not totally consistent between these measures but overall the comparison provides a good understanding of educational disadvantage.

The school with the lowest ICSEA rating, Smithton, has the lowest scores in Reading and Number and the school with the highest ICSEA rating, Woodbridge, has the highest NAPLAN scores.

Table 3. Selected District High NAPLAN results 2023 – Year 7

School	ICSEA rating	NAPLAN Reading	NAPLAN Number	Student nos.
Smithton	874	448	446	327
New Norfolk	888	465	464	326
Oatlands	910	461	451	193
Tasman	920	467	473	151
Deloraine	923	497	481	284
Flinders	928	540	591	102
Scottsdale	946	486	497	308
St Helens	957	500	499	509
Woodbridge	1004	557	532	345

Table 4. District High NAPLAN results 2023 – Year 9

School	ICSEA rating	NAPLAN Reading	NAPLAN Number	Student nos.
Smithton	874	538	527	327
New Norfolk	888	497	503	326
Oatlands	910	499	483	193
Tasman	920	517	497	151
Deloraine	923	548	537	284
Flinders	928	n/a	n/a	102
Scottsdale	946	523	527	308
St Helens	957	541	553	509
Woodbridge	1004	581	580	345

While more work would be needed to fully establish the relative disadvantage of schools in other regional areas of Tasmania, Tables 3 and 4 show that those schools with lower ICSEA ratings need further measures to improve outcomes to bring them up to a reasonable standard which is comparable with schools in urban and metropolitan areas.

4. Educational inequity in Australia and Tasmania

Nationally there have been attempts to improve educational equity in Australia. In 2008, the Federal, State and Territory Ministers for Education signed 'The Melbourne Declaration'. This set two goals for young Australians; the first was that *Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence*, and the second included the statement that *'all young Australian become successful learners'*. This Declaration was then updated in 2019 by the Alice Springs Declaration to *'promote excellence and equity and more generally enable young Australians to become, confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active and informed members of the community'*. Both of these declarations are laudable but there is little evidence that they have brought any meaningful educational improvements to either the Huon Valley, or more generally, schools in regional Tasmania.

There is overwhelming evidence from education commentators and academics that Australia's education system, and that includes Tasmania, is inequitable. Pasi Sahlberg (2023) writes that *'we have a high concentration of socio-educational disadvantage found in many public schools'*. The Gonski Institute (2020) reports that UNICEF *'found the Australian education system to be among the most unequal in the wealthier part of the world'*. The Australian Business and Community Network (undated website) (ABCN) reporting Pasi Sahlberg, says, *'the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools in Australia is one of the largest in the OECD....'* The ABCN highlights:

- the gap in teacher shortages between advantaged and disadvantaged schools in the OECD,
- inequality in the allocation of educational staff is the highest in the OECD,
- Australia is only 1 of 7 countries where disadvantaged schools have higher student teacher ratios than advantaged schools

- Australia has the fourth largest gap in the shortage of educational material and physical infrastructure between advantaged and disadvantaged schools,
- inequity in the allocation of material resources is the 5th highest in the OECD,
- student achievement gaps in reading and number for low-SES, Indigenous and remote students lags those of high-SES students by 3 years or more.

Research by Smith, Parr and Muhidin (2018) spatially analysed NAPLAN results and found that there was a strong correlation between the advantaged suburbs having high school results and almost no schools in disadvantaged areas having high results. They also noted a trend for a widening gap in performance since 2008.

How can the negative impacts of the points raised by Sahlberg, the Gonski Institute and the ABCN be overcome in regional Tasmania? To start to address this question it is important to understand government funding for schools and other sources of financial support for schools.

5. School funding in the Huon Valley and Kingston

Funding for schools is provided by both State and Federal government with Tasmanian government providing the major proportion of funding to state schools and the Federal government to 'private' and Catholic schools. In addition to government funding, schools levy fees, and in some cases, have access to other sources of finance. This information is presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Sources of school funding per student for schools in the Huon Valley and Kingston

School	State funding	Federal funding	Total govt. funding	School fees etc.	Total all funding
Huonville High	16,895	5,301	22,196	345 + 62 (other)	22,604
St James College	4,744	19,002	23,746	1,717 + 3,650	29,113
St Aloysious College	2,760	12,838	15,598	3,039 + 3,525	22,162
Kingston High	14,275	4,095	18,367	834 + 85	19,287
Tarremah Steiner	2,495	12,145	14,640	8,591 + 372	23,602

Source: data extracted from My School website

The government funding for each student to both schools in the Huon is greater than for schools in Kingston. The total combined government funding is greatest for St James College. Private and Catholic schools levy higher fees than state schools and in some cases have access to other sources of funding. The total expenditure per student is highest at St James College but the data from Tables 1 and 2 demonstrates that this isn't able to lift the NAPLAN results to the same level as schools in Kingston and Hobart.

From the perspective of achieving equitable educational outcomes it can be seen that insufficient money is being injected into both regional high schools. Furthermore, even with the addition of some \$5,500 of funding per student from fees and other sources, St James College is unable to make any meaningful progress towards educational parity. This suggests that just providing more funding is unlikely to bring about better results and a new approach will have to be taken to achieve better educational outcomes.

6. Finding a solution to regional disparity

It is reasonable to assume that overcoming intergenerational inequity and poor regional educational outcomes are unlikely to be achieved unless we look for new solutions – spending more money is likely to help, but overall, a new approach is required. Both school systems represented in the Huon Valley, State and Catholic, are currently failing to bring about learning outcomes to maximize opportunities for young people for the future.

There has been a tendency in Tasmania to either underestimate the challenge of educational equity or ignore it and facilitate the children of ‘squeaky wheels’ to attend schools outside their locality. Children with more highly educated parents and those from more prosperous areas are likely to have already received considerable advantage through living in a ‘richer’ social, technological and cultural home environment. Pasi Sahlberg (2013) points out that 60% of the variability in student achievement in school happens outside the school gate.

The issue of addressing equity has been expressed by the OECD, 2016

Achieving equity in education means ensuring that students’ socio-economic status has little to do with learning outcomes. Learning should not be hindered by whether a child comes from a poor family, has an immigrant background, is raised by a single parent or has limited resources at home, such as no computer or no quiet room for studying. Successful education systems understand this and have found ways to allocate resources so as to level the playing field for students who lack the material and human resources that students in advantaged families enjoy. When more students learn, the whole system benefits.

Based on the above statement, it is proposed that a locally based, **‘Huon Valley Taskforce for Educational Renewal’** be established. One taskforce to lift the performance of both Huonville High School and St James College and to plan for the future of education in the Valley, including the return of students from schools in Kingston and Hobart. It would need to have the support of both the state education and Catholic education systems and be endorsed at the Ministerial level with a sensible financial commitment to facilitate improvement. The chair of the taskforce would be someone respected in the community but not necessarily an educationalist.

Membership would be broadly based and include representation at the appropriate level from Huon Valley Council, health, business, early childhood education, post compulsory education, social services and housing services, educationalists and young people.

Membership needs to reflect the fact that there is likely to be diverse disadvantage in various aspects of childrens' lives, and 'schooling' will need to fulfil a number of roles. An integral part of the establishment and operation of the Taskforce would be a carefully crafted whole of community communications strategy as well as an ongoing progressive evaluation program undertaken by UTAS.

Improving educational outcomes in the Huon Valley will not be an easy task. It is not something that can be 'fixed' quickly. Halsey, (p.49) refers to the role of 'anchor' type organisations or taskforces that can build local capacity through local control and includes reference to how they have been used in the United Kingdom³. The overall aim of the Taskforce would be to make school choice equitable so that young people in the Huon Valley have the same opportunity for success as all other young people in Tasmania without leaving the Valley to complete secondary school.

³ Civil Renewal Unit. (2004). Firm Foundations: The Governments Framework for Community Capacity Building. London: Home Office.

Conclusion and recommendation

This submission was started on the ‘hunch’ that there was a degree of educational disadvantage in the Huon Valley, and, as the paper developed through the analysis of NAPLAN figures and reference to sources presenting persistent and ‘grossly unequal education system’⁴, it became obvious that it was a far deeper problem occurring over many years. Not only is it a problem in the Huon Valley but also in other regional areas of Tasmania. On reflection, this was not surprising as Tasmania is the poorest state, and regions, the poorest parts of the state.

While the extent of the disadvantage became evident during the writing of this submission, it is highly likely that the level of disadvantage is not unknown to those involved in the State, Catholic and Independent sectors of education. What is most surprising is that this has continued to occur, and (probably) worsen in recent years, without a major initiatives to turn it around.

It is now most important that there is direct action in the form of creating the Huon Educational Renewal Taskforce. But it would be a mistake to expect the ‘system’ that has been responsible for allowing such long lasting, deep inequality to occur will be able and willing to instigate the formation of the Taskforce.

RECOMMENDATION

It is therefore important that the Independent Review recommend the establishment of the Huon Educational Renewal Taskforce with a remit to advise the two schools and the Department of Education and Catholic Education, and other Government and non-government organisations about what needs to be done to increase community involvement to lift educational attainment at the two schools.

Properly executed and resourced this has the potential to lift educational school performance, completion and attainment levels to Year 12, and contribute to developing the Tasmanian economy in the future.

⁴ Barry Jones, October 12-18, 2024. The Saturday Paper p.7, ‘*Twelve Keys to leadership*’

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