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**Participation in the classroom, productivity in the workforce – unfulfilled expectations**

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*Abstract*

In Australia, as in other countries, three public concerns about education can be discerned. One of them is concerned with work skills in the context of economic objectives of innovation and productivity. Another is concerned with life skills in the context of objectives of social sustainability and self-fulfilment. The third is concerned with the maintenance of cultural and intellectual standards – and has often been associated with criticism of educational progressivism. These concerns have informed Australian educational policy. The economic objective has been particularly influential in higher education; the social objective has informed school initiatives concerned with values education, and civics and citizenship; and the third was apparent in the efforts by the Howard government to prescribe a national curriculum in Australian history. This paper explores the provenance of these concerns and considers the consequences of the policies that have pursued their different objectives.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century three forces converged on schools, universities and other educational institutions. Each of them had a wider import; they operated across national boundaries and affected other areas of government, civil society and social practice. Each claimed a particular authority both as a practical necessity and a moral imperative.

**Education as an instrument of economic growth**

The first of them thought of education as an instrument of economic growth. This idea has a long history but gathered force after the Second World War when industrialised nations adopted new methods of economic management based on full employment, greater public provision and improved living standards. As

part of these arrangements, governments sought to augment knowledge, technological innovation and productivity. For two decades, from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, the industrial economies achieved high rates of growth, and economists became increasingly convinced that there was a correlation between outlays on education and returns from increased labour productivity. By the early 1960s they had found a concept to express the relationship: educational expenditure was an investment in 'human capital'.

This was the period when the Australian educational system took on some of its enduring features. Partly because of the post-war baby boom and partly because of the demographic effects of the large-scale immigration program, there was a concentration of effort on building schools, first primary schools and then secondary schools. As retention rates rose, the number of school students doubled. To staff these schools as well as to meet the growing demand for professional expertise, there was a fourfold increase in university enrolments. Total expenditure on education grew from 1.62 per cent of the Gross National Product in 1950-51, to 3.16 per cent in 1960-61, and 4.62 per cent by 1970-71.

More than 4 per cent of this aggregate of 4.62 per cent of educational expenditure came from government. The investment in human capital was a public investment yielding public benefits. Apart from the not-for-profit, church-based private schools, schooling was free. The Commonwealth's involvement began with universities and expanded rapidly. Higher education places were allocated on the basis of merit across a range of courses determined in conjunction with the funding bodies and relevant professions. An axiom of public provision was that all talent should be maximised in the national interest.

The principle of equality of educational opportunity came up against the realities of economic inequality in the home and the workforce. School performance

became increasingly important as a determinant of vocational destination, so that secondary education provided some with an academic preparation and others with technical and vocational preparation. A similar division operated in post-secondary education and was formalised following Leslie Martin's 1964 review into the binary divide of universities and colleges of advanced education. These features persisted after the Whitlam government embarked on a further expansion of provision through the establishment of the Schools Commission, as well as abolition of university fees.

But the Whitlam government marked the apogee of public investment in education and the end of the two decades of uninterrupted economic growth. With the collapse of the Bretton Woods arrangements for the international monetary system and the OPEC oil crisis, there was a disruption of world trade, a contraction of activity, a severe fiscal crisis and an abandonment of the previous methods of economic management. Despite its initial cuts in public expenditure, the Fraser government was no more successful than other governments elsewhere in finding a solution to the changed circumstances, and by the time it lost office unemployment stood at ten per cent.

Out of this international malaise came a new economic order, one based on greater mobility of finance and investment, production and trade; a greater emphasis on technological innovation and competitive advantage in the high-value-added goods and service sectors of the knowledge economy, and an increased emphasis on skills. Australia embraced this regime in the early 1980s with the floating of the dollar, freeing controls on capital movements, reduction of tariff protection and tightening of fiscal policy. The transition was protracted and painful, the dividends slow to appear.

For all the talk of the Clever Country, the neoliberal reconstruction came late to education. During the 1980s the government sought to increase participation, but funding lagged and was accompanied by expectations of greater efficiency and performance-based budgeting. It was left to John Dawkins at the end of the decade to set about integrating universities into the knowledge economy with his creation of the Unified National System, now administered directly and imposing new systems of management as well as competitive procedures for research funding. In school education he was less interventionist, working with the states to establish the national goals and common learning areas in 1989.

There was a contrast also between the funding arrangements for schools and universities. Neoliberalism brought a retreat from public provision, and an emphasis on user pays. Higher education was now understood as providing private as well as public benefits, and the private benefit (previously captured through the progressive system of income taxation) was now to be captured by income-contingent loans. This principle spread into full-fee postgraduate courses, then domestic undergraduate courses, as well as the burgeoning market for international students. The trend was even more marked in vocational education, where commercial provision was encouraged.

Education is now Australia's third largest income earner, \$12.5 billion a year, behind iron ore and coal – though those two commodity export sectors give pause to the idea that we have joined the knowledge economy. The application of the market to higher education has had far-reaching consequences that are beyond the cope of this address, but one of direct consequence is that it superimposed customer demand on workforce planning. The majority of undergraduate places are still offered on the basis of merit, but there are now differentiated fees and information about entry scores and graduate outcomes

exert a strong influence on choice. Students are expected to follow price signals in the expectation of income returns.

In schools, on the other hand, the dual system of public and private providers continued and the Commonwealth continued to supplement the provision by the state governments. Under the Howard government, as you know, the balance tilted heavily towards the private sector, with significant implications for resource levels, enrolment patterns and educational outcomes, but even if it was becoming increasingly residual in character, the principle of public provision remained.

### **Education for life**

One reason for this is that the school has always been more than a training institution for the labour market. From the time the colonial governments created their systems of public education, compulsory, secular and free, they had a civic function. The school was expected to be a place of character formation, socialising the young and moulding their development as future citizens. The changing and contested expectations of this function are the second force that operates on our schools.

Put simply, there has been a persistent and growing tension between the expectations imposed on the school and the capacity of the school to meet them. The school has a long history as a custodial institution, which enforced attendance and imposed discipline, but it was also an educational institution that joined teachers and students in a common endeavour.

That tension has become far more insistent and a number of reasons are discernible. One is that schools deal with a far greater diversity of students and

parents with much higher standards of accountability. Another is that larger cohorts of students stay on in the post-compulsory years of secondary education with a much greater range of aptitudes and expectations. Furthermore, schools have become repositories of a host of expectations to make good shortcomings that are brought to them, from sexual health or obesity to life skills and computer literacy. And this overload is compounded by the low esteem for the teaching profession.

Teachers have always had an ambiguous status. They were less well paid and less autonomous than other professions, but teaching provided many able young Australians with was a low entry-cost career – and it also offered an early outlet for talented women. The bursaries provided to trainees enabled a significant cohort of Australian families of limited means to obtain access to the university in the post-war period.

But the teaching profession slipped down the income table as other graduate professions expanded. It also suffered from the tightening of public expenditure that was part of neoliberal economic policy, a predicament compounded by the fiscal disadvantage of the states. Professional preparation and development were poorly served by Dawkins' changes to higher education, which took a particular toll on the amalgamated colleges and then on university education faculties – the neglect of teacher education is a longstanding national disgrace.

Teachers in government schools were then denigrated by the Howard government in campaigns that culminated in the requirement that all schools adopt and display a statement of values. Brendan Nelson provided an object lesson in the negative value of blackmail when he made the flying of the national flag a condition of Commonwealth funding.

Some of us leave the classroom with happier memories than others, but distance seems to lend enchantment to our experience. So many of those who come forward to prescribe what students need to know, how they ought to behave, and what they should esteem or revere, pass over their own difficulties of application and engagement. They seem to think that education is little more than a process of instruction.

### **Education as necessary knowledge**

The previous government also brought a third pressure to bear on schools when it sought to impose control of the curriculum. As you know, the attempt in the late 1980s to negotiate a national framework succumbed to the determination of some states to retain control of the curriculum. In the late 1990s David Kemp used testing and reporting of performance in key subjects as an instrument of accountability, but in 2005 the Commonwealth made it a condition of federal funding that national statements of learning had to be agreed and implemented for all students by 2008 in four curriculum areas: English, mathematics, science and civics and citizenship. The last of these was subsequently replaced by history.

The Howard government's increasing emphasis on restoring a common and mandatory curriculum in traditional subject disciplines was accompanied by a public campaign against educational progressivism. It was led by Kevin Donnelly, a former teacher turned educational consultant awarded a number of contracts by the Commonwealth department; Donnelly found a staff position in a Howard minister's office and then began to appear regularly in Rupert Murdoch's national newspaper as it opened a new salient in its culture wars.

Donnelly's modus operandi was to seize on particular passages in curriculum documents, usually for English literature or history, and claim that they sacrificed the literary canon to popular culture or betrayed the Western tradition. He was particularly concerned with moral relativism and postmodernism, terms that he used interchangeably and with little evidence of familiarity of either. Soft and faddish methods of teaching mathematics and literacy also came in for criticism. More broadly, he blamed outcomes-based education for an abandonment of rigour and a decline of standards.

I had prior dealings with Kevin Donnelly after David Kemp employed him as consultant to the Discovering Democracy program, but was taken aback when I read his 2007 tract, *Dumbing Down*, to discover how poorly he reads, thinks and writes. If nothing else, *The Australian* seems to employ competent sub-editors, for *Dumbing down* is a book of slipshod argument, poor scholarship and meretricious presentation. It is ridden with neologism, solecisms, faulty syntax and faulty logic. It's almost as if he set out to demonstrate the shortcomings that he denounces.

Donnelly's alarmist newspaper articles were taken up by reporters in *The Australian*, who sought responses from education officers, using the 'have you stopped beating your wife' mode of interrogation in the hope of attracting attention from metropolitan tabloids and talkback radio that would generate sufficient impetus to force a retreat by the minister.

This guerrilla campaign seems to have encouraged Julie Bishop, the Commonwealth Minister, to adopt the same rhetoric; hence her 'straight out of Chairman Mao's Little Red Book' passage in an address on the need to lift educational standards. The offensive was then taken up by the prime minister,

who joined in the criticism of standards in school education, and expressed a particular concern for the teaching of Australian history.

In his 2006 Australia Day speech John Howard called for a history curriculum based on 'facts' to replace what he described as the current 'fragmented stew of themes and issues', and declared that he was prepared to lead 'a coalition of the willing' to undertake a 'root and branch' renewal of Australian history. It is not clear whether that phrase 'coalition of the willing' deliberately echoed President Bush or simply came naturally to him.

In any event, the Commonwealth proceeded with its History Summit in 2007. The Minister for Education issued the invitations to the Summit, but the list of invitees and the decision to commission a prominent history warrior to prepare the curriculum document revealed the keen interest of the Prime Minister. After the Summit participants set aside that document for a more realistic approach, and a working party fleshed it out, the Prime Minister again intervened to have it revised in accordance with his wishes. The result was a striking instance of the problems that arise when enthusiasts unfamiliar with classroom practice prescribe necessary knowledge.

Meanwhile the Commonwealth insisted that all States must restore history as 'a stand-alone' subject; three states indicated that they were satisfied with their existing Studies of Society and Environment, but agreed to comply after they were threatened with the withdrawal of federal funding. By this time, however, the Prime Minister faced a general election. With his defeat the Howard version of school history died and the unilateral approach to educational reform was abandoned. The new government has appointed Barry McGaw to chair a

National Curriculum Board, which includes representatives of the states and territories, as well as the Catholic and Independent systems, to draw together the best programs into a national curriculum.

### **The three expectations converge**

My sketch of three forces working on the Australian education system, the economic, the civic and the curricular, has been a summary and selective one.

I have suggested that the application of neoliberal economic principles has been far-reaching but uneven. Their effect can be found in the organisation and management of schools, as well as in closer relationships with industry, but are less apparent in educational provision. They have profoundly affected the university. Skills for work, as your conference theme puts it, are part of the language of schooling, but hardly embedded in the curriculum except in the vocational streams of the post-compulsory years. They dominate post-secondary education.

The civic mission of the university has been largely abandoned. To read the Murray report of the late 1950s, which provided the blueprint for the Commonwealth funding the rapid growth of Australian universities, is to be reminded of a lost framework of values. 'Industry and commerce call for more graduates, government and public administration call for more graduates, and all the services of the welfare state call for more graduates', wrote Sir Keith Murray, the chairman of the British University Grants Committee. 'Such professional preparation', he continued, 'must be not merely a technical or

specialist training but a full and true education, befitting a free man and the citizen of a free country’.

Compare this with the discussion paper released by the current review of higher education chaired by Denise Bradley, which describes higher education as an industry. ‘Higher education’, the discussion paper states, ‘is the site for the production and transmission of new knowledge and for new applications of knowledge. It is here that the most highly skilled members of the workforce are educated and here too that the intellectual base for new knowledge intensive industries is formed.’

The paper acknowledges that universities contribute to ‘developing and maintaining a civil and sustainable society’, but gives no indication of how that subsidiary function is performed or how it might bear on policy. This element of the blueprint is noticeably underdeveloped, though I would not attribute primary responsibility for this to Denise Bradley and her colleagues, for the civic role finds no place in the review’s terms of reference.

Civic education remains a vital expectation of schools, but there is no agreement about how it is to be undertaken and the role is beset by the practical difficulties and political interference that I described. Skills for life, the formulation of your conference theme, seem far more uncertain than its complement, skills for work.

Finally, the arguments over curriculum that I referred to introduce a further dimension of contention. If schools are expected to produce skills for work and skills for life, what are the forms of knowledge that need to be taught? The Howard government’s ill-fated attempt to prescribe the teaching of Australian

history offers an instructive example of how not to do it, but also throws into bold relief the way that schools are expected to incorporate teaching that seems some way removed from concerns with economic benefit and character formation.

And here again there is a marked disjuncture between the secondary and tertiary levels of education. History has no such footing in our universities. It is left, along with the humanities and many of the social sciences, to sink or swim according to the vagaries of student demand and research opportunity.

Nor has it figured in national research policy. The record of the Howard government was characterised by a narrow instrumentalism. Insofar as it acknowledged that the national research effort had implications for the country's capacity to participate in the knowledge economy, it directed the principal research bodies to concentrate on areas dominated by science, medicine and technology. The funding program Backing Australia's Ability was accompanied by gross interference in the Australian Research Council for reasons of political opportunism.

The early affirmation of freedom from political interference given by Senator Carr, the new Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, is thus important and welcome. So too are his indications that the social sciences, humanities, creative and performing arts have a place in national research policy.

One reason for their importance, I suggest, is that innovation policy here and in other countries is characterised by a credulous universalism. Dazzled by the success of Silicon Valley, and heavily influenced by models of the information

economy promulgated by the OECD and other international agencies, policy makers apply the same strategies for taking discoveries from bench to business with a singular inattention to local contexts. If nothing else, the humanities and social sciences can assist a better understanding of the contingent nature of innovation.

But they can do so only if their own place in schools and universities is acknowledged. So in the remainder of this address I want to take up the place of the humanities and social sciences in Australian education.

### **Social and disciplinary education: the example of civics**

Back in the 1990s, when my hair was far from grey, I had the opportunity to chair an inquiry into civics and citizenship education at the invitation of the prime minister at that time, Paul Keating. I did so with Ken Boston, who was then the Director-General of School Education in New South Wales, and Susan Pascoe, who was the Melbourne Policy Co-ordinator for the Catholic Education Commission

A large survey of public opinion, commissioned by the government to assist our work, indicated 'widespread ignorance and misconception about the structure and function of Australia's system of government, about its origins, and about the ways it can serve the needs of citizens'. Among the findings of this survey was that only 18 per cent of respondents were aware of the contents of the Commonwealth Constitution and only 40 per cent could name the two houses of the federal parliament. These findings predictably attracted widespread media

attention – that was probably the purpose – but fostered an impression that the Group was working with a narrow understanding of formal citizenship.

The inquiry received more than 180 submissions and consulted widely. There was a marked discrepancy between the advice received from the school sector and that from other bodies. Educational authorities, teachers and parents welcomed the opportunity to revive citizenship education, but were concerned that it go beyond teaching about the system of government and provide opportunities to engage students in activities fostering active citizenship.

Political leaders and government agencies turned out to be strong advocates of citizenship education, but understood it more instrumentally, expecting schools to transmit formal knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and practical skills in exercising them. Non-government organisations were equally enthusiastic and placed special emphasis on ensuring that their contribution to national life be recognised. The enthusiasts shared a common conviction that there was a civic deficit, and in keeping with the Australian tradition (which makes voting compulsory) they expected government action to remedy it.

We made a number of suggestions about the citizenship education undertaken by government agencies, and in the community, and we did endorse school programs for active citizenship. Our principal recommendations concerned the preparation of curriculum materials and professional development of teachers for the compulsory years of schooling. We thought these could be used across several of the recently agreed key learning areas, but, while acknowledging that

this was a matter for the states and territories, recommended that they should prepare mandatory syllabuses.

This brought us face to face with the key learning area of Studies of Society and Environment, which was already an overcrowded and shifting field of contention. It incorporated traditional subjects such as history and geography, and newer ones such as political, legal and business studies, as well the more comprehensive social studies, which already was expanding into a new subject called, confusingly, Studies of Society and Environment or SOSE.

Like social studies, SOSE incorporated elements of various disciplines into a contemporary and inquiry-based approach to learning. When it was well designed, well supported and well taught, SOSE could engage students in an integrated course of study that met the educational objectives of teaching for work and life. When it was not, it didn't, and since SOSE was competing in the timetable with disciplinary subjects such as history, this tended to be a zero-sum game of considerable acrimony.

The contest lent itself to caricature. History was described as boring, concerned with dead people and old-fashioned in its pedagogy. SOSE was described as trendy and shallow. But SOSE was a form of social education with the wind in its sails.

Our inquiry made no judgement about the merits of SOSE as a subject, but we did observe that the key learning area was overcrowded, and said that the essential disciplinary underpinning of civics was history.

The Keating government accepted these recommendations and made provision for their implementation under our supervision. That was in its early stages when the government changed hands. The new Howard government was suspicious of the political provenance of the program and put it under review, but in 1997 agreed to continue funding with relatively minor changes: the emphasis on developing active citizenship skills to participate in current civics issues would be lessened in order that greater emphasis be placed on the historical development of Australian democracy. Hence the program was renamed *Discovering Democracy*, and the reference group expanded with John Hirst, another historian, as its chair.

Working with the Curriculum Corporation and consulting with the stakeholders, the group produced educational materials for primary and secondary schools, accompanied by a program of professional development for teachers based on the materials. The materials were organised in units to facilitate accommodation into the different curricula of the States. Their thematic and sequential character enabled them to be used in SOSE as well as history classes, and they combined knowledge-based and activity-based approaches.

By the end of the century the body of materials came to represent a sequential, though unofficial, national course of study in civics and citizenship education for the compulsory years of schooling. This was a first for any aspect of school education in Australia, though of course full implementation was not achieved because the teaching of civics was still not mandated.

In 1999, when the original 1989 National Goals for Schooling were revised, all states and territories agreed with the federal government to add the goal that when students left school, they should be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life; but they retained the right to do this in their own ways. An evaluation in 2003 suggested that perhaps half of all schools were using the materials.

At times there were tensions between the supervisory group and David Kemp, the Education Minister, over approval of the materials, but he largely allowed them to be released to schools without interference. David Kemp is of course a former professor political science, with an inclination towards traditional subjects. It was at this time that I raised with him the erosion of history teaching in schools, and while I welcomed his concern for its revival, I was somewhat disconcerted when he suggested the remedy might be to abolish SOSE, and found myself trying to explain that it would be difficult for the Commonwealth to override the states and territories. I clearly spoke too soon.

By this time SOSE was attracting criticism. It was a form of social education to be sure, but progressive in its orientation, and while the Howard government pursued economic liberalism, the prime minister and his colleagues were socially conservative. In civic education the government inclined to a didactic teaching of democracy with charters of values and chaplains. More broadly, John Howard celebrated the lifting of the pall of political correctness, the termination of 'endless and agonised navel-gazing' and the disbandment of the 'perpetual seminar on the national identity'. But as he demonstrated in his proposed constitutional preamble and later in his citizenship test, he was not abandoning this concern – he simply replaced discussion with promulgation.

David Kemp's interest in history was less polemical. He regarded it, I think, as an important branch of knowledge and a form of understanding, best studied systematically in its own right. In this sense he was perhaps a liberal of an older kind, who believed that if students were given the opportunity to learn history, they would draw their own conclusions.

In any event, he established an inquiry into school history as an adjunct to the Discovering Democracy program. The inquiry was undertaken by Tony Taylor and found evidence of uneven provision, fragmented curricula and frequent recourse to teachers with no training in the subject. In response the Commonwealth government funded the establishment of a National Centre for History Education and the development of some history materials.

Running alongside those initiatives were those undertaken in the states and territories. Here there was a reinstatement of history in Victoria, in place of the 'time, continuity and change strand' of SOSE. New South Wales went further in its mandating of Australian history, an initiative of the premier, Bob Carr, with the encouragement of a former State Minister of Education, Rod Cavalier.

Along with a number of history teachers, I have misgivings about this approach, partly because it displaced some excellent history subjects, especially in non-Australian history, and partly because it employs a top-down syllabus crowded with landmark events. But this was the approach followed by John Howard in his unsuccessful attempt to impose Australian history, and I have already related its fate.

## Conclusions

What conclusions should we draw from this narrative of curricular endeavours in civics, history and SOSE? It reveals the multiplicity of participants seeking to determine what schools should teach, and the complexity of their purposes. The views of the teachers, their professional judgements on the practicality of the proposals, and attention to their needs, play a minor part in the story.

The number of external participants is suggestive of the pressures that neoliberalism has exerted. The revival of interest in civics coincided with similar developments in the United Kingdom and the United States. They too had adopted economic policies that removed many of the secure fixtures, releasing the market into areas of life that had previously been protected. They too experienced a disquiet that traditional community values and cohesion were breaking down, and they too looked to schools to restore them. Education was expected both to serve the needs of innovation, enterprise and productivity, and to make good the values of social life and the attachment to liberal democracy. It was to build skills for work and life.

SOSE and civics provided two approaches to this task, with different emphases and bases of support. History stood for an alternative, disciplinary orientation, affirming the importance of cultural and intellectual concerns. In saying this, I do not wish to give the impression that history is irrelevant to work and life. On the contrary, it is vitally concerned with both. It deals with past modes of production and present one, with the transformations that created a market economy and a global one, as well as the consequences. It reveals the changing patterns of social organisation, past and present civilizations, and the ways they ordered their

affairs. It treats these dimensions of experience in depth, fostering skills of inquiry and judgement. Its utility is augmented, not diminished, by its disciplinary orientation.

It is unfortunate that the recent attempt to restore history to the classroom was so manifestly manipulated for political advantage by John Howard and so clumsily mishandled. After the prosecution of the history wars, this conservative provenance was probably inevitable.

Labor's record on the subject is not encouraging. As the architects of reform in the 1980s, Labor ministers were clearly sympathetic to social education and SOSE. Paul Keating's 'big picture' in the 1990s had a substantial, if idiosyncratic, historical content, but his educational initiative in civics was stillborn. When Howard began to exploit the history wars, the Labor leadership was conspicuously reluctant to be wedged.

The riding instructions to the National Curriculum Board are that it is to ensure that 'all young Australians are equipped with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world'. It is currently wrestling with the task. I understand that an integrated approach is likely to continue in primary education but that there is a push from the social educationalists to extend it into the middle years, where student disaffection and low attainment are a concern, and subsume history. That would be a pity. There is no evidence at all that social education improves outcomes in years 7 to 9, and the national evidence is clear that to do so would damage history enrolments in the later years.

So I hope that in its renewed attention to education for work and life, the technocratic approach that was so evident under Labor during the 1980s does not revive. I hope that education for life is pursued with a generosity of expectation and a proper appreciation of the nature of the school. And I hope particularly that the emphases on vocational and life skills are not imposed at the expense of education in its full and proper sense.