

'The Role of Education in the Building of Australia'

a speech at the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Certifying Authorities
Conference Dinner
Rydge's Capital Hill Hotel, Canberra, 1 August 1996

by Don Aitkin
Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra

Oscar Wilde once characterised the sport of fox-hunting as 'the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable'. Cabinet has been meeting this week, and will meet pretty consistently for the next three weeks, trying to shape a Budget which will fulfill the Government's election promises but also deal with a predicted deficit of unknown size and parameters which was discovered, if that is the right verb, after the Coalition had attained power. Oscar might have described the past few months' Ministerial preoccupation with arithmetically downsizing the public service and threatening the public sector generally with 'cuts' as 'the meticulous in pursuit of the ridiculous', since no group of politicians can govern without the support, brains and experience of its civil service, and an Australia without a decently large and confident public sector will be a cheerless place in which to live and work.

What alarms me about all these games is that those engaged in them so easily lose sight of the core conditions of our nation's existence and its future status in the world. The most important of those core conditions is education. Australia has a comparative advantage in its region because a high proportion of its population is educated to secondary and tertiary level, and in English. As you all know, as a nation we have moved from a preoccupation with pastoral and agricultural pursuits in the 19th century to manufacturing in the mid 20th century, to service activities in the latter 20th century and now to knowledge-based pursuits as we enter the 21st century. We are doing well in this new domain, but our success depends wholly on high levels of education within the workforce.

Yet we have not been known for very long as a society which puts great store on formal education. When I was in high school only a small proportion of kids went on to the senior years, and only a small proportion of those who gained their Leaving Certificate went on to higher education. We could justify that state of affairs on the ground that we were rich (3rd in the world), and that we had an immigration policy which brought skilled people here. Well, we don't talk like that any more. We rank 28th on one measure of richness, our wage and salary levels are low in comparison to many countries, and like the developing countries we are learning to live by our wits, not solely on our natural resources. An indication of our success is that for the last two years the export earnings of 'education' (mostly through providing places at universities to foreign students for a fee) have exceeded those of the wheat industry. We need to go on working hard at all this, not slacken off.

Let me engage in comparisons for a moment more. The second world war was followed by a gradually increasing interest on the part of both students and parents in kids' getting more education, and that process began to accelerate in

the 1980s. In 1983 only one child in three completed six years of secondary school; today the figure is more than eight in ten. In 1983 the higher education system's student load (equivalent full-time students) was 263,000. Today it is twice as large. That is not all. The contribution of the TAFE system to contemporary Australia has been comparably impressive. Every occupation in Australia now demands serious post-school training of some kind, and only a minority of young Australians now escape some kind of educational program after they have left school. There are not many jobs for those who do.

I cannot speak for all sectors, but I can say that in the higher education field the quality of our graduates has never been higher, notwithstanding that there are more of them than ever. And every year, even more clamour to enter university than can be admitted there. Education in Australia, especially in the last decade, has been one of the country's great successes.

Yet somehow governments don't see it this way. First, and wrongly, they see education as something which government provides, and educational policy as something which a wise and beneficent government originates. In fact, education is something which a society provides for itself; government is simply an instrument, and one quarter of all schoolchildren are educated outside the government system anyway. In my judgment educational policy in the last fifty years has been largely a case of government's responding to popular pressure for more schools, more colleges, more universities — more places.

Second, governments tend to see education as an expenditure rather than an investment. They are not wholly to be blamed, for the expenditure is a cost at the time they are in office, while the benefits from the investment largely accrue to later generations and governments. Yet you would think by now that any Australian Government would see that expenditure on education, at all levels, is a principal responsibility of those in power. As a society, we simply cannot have enough of it. Every Government wishes that its predecessors had done more in this or that aspect of education.

Third, governments tend to see education as part of the labour market process, partly because governments generally today have forgotten that Australia is a society first, and an economy second, and partly because in some sense you can estimate the 'performance' of the sector in attaining labour market goals, while you simply can't measure the virtue of the education system in helping to produce skilled, self-confident, self-controlled adults ready to play their full part in social life. Government programs exemplify this interest in jobs, whatever the rhetoric of Ministers.

Finally, all governments have a residual fear of education. Not only does it give people ideas above their station, but at its best it prepares people to play a full life as citizens. Our political system, however, relies on a compliant citizenry that, outside election time, is prepared to leave politics to political parties and politicians. It is fair to say that the increasing discontent Australians have shown about their political system over the last twenty years is directly related to the fact that much larger proportions of the electorate than in the past are now able to make good political judgments without the mediating role of political parties or politicians. Of course, that kind of fear is shared by many Australians who are not politicians: too much education

(especially of the bad kind, whatever that is) is not good for people. There is a strong anti-intellectual streak in the Australian psyche, and it is no friend to education.

None of this would be a major problem today were it not for the fact that neither side of politics wants to deal with our ramshackle system of public revenue generation, the Coalition because it thinks it lost the 1993 elections over the proposed Goods and Services Tax, and Labor because it thinks that indirect taxes are undemocratic and regressive (and it also thinks that the Coalition lost in 1993 because of the GST). As you all know, again, Australia used to be a country noted for the high proportion of the workforce that was in the public sector, and the high proportion of Gross Domestic Product that was devoted to government revenue. Although there are still people who think these conditions still operate, we are now at the bottom of the heap in both respects among the OECD countries, and plainly our new Government is trying for the gold medal — it's going to be either Australia, the USA or Japan which gets to the next millennium without any public sector or any public revenue at all.

The choice is not between a publicly funded system of education or a privately funded one. At every level Australian education is the product of a balance between public and private funding, and always has been. What changes is the balance. I ought to make it clear that I see the funding balance in higher education shifting slowly towards the private purse, if only because the traditional case for public subsidisation of higher education has to alter when large rather than small proportions of the population attend university. But there seems to me no reason in principle that a society should not regard three or four years of higher education, to be taken at some point after high school, as being as much an 'entitlement' as six years of secondary education. That has to be argued out in the political arena, and it has to be said that secondary education, until recently, was not any kind of entitlement for Australians. We have argued our way to that good outcome.

There are always debates about the purposes, structure, curriculum and accessibility of education. So there should be. In its provision of education a society defines itself. What is so dismaying about our contemporary situation is that we are apparently to have a major shift in one aspect of what we are doing — the funding of education — without any kind of prior debate at all. It is all being done because of an obsession with cuts made necessary by a forecast deficit in the Budget whose rationale, or so it seems to me, is party-political. The Federal Minister has said that education cannot be quarantined for the need to find savings. But defence has been quarantined. There hasn't been so much as a whisper of a debate about that clear priority.

Education, along with immigration and prosperity, has built the Australian society of today. If Australia, and humanity generally, are to solve the problems which face us now and will be more pressing as the new century advances, it will be because we have managed to harness knowledge, good will and courage in the common cause. I would love to believe that sentiments like this were part of the Cabinet room discussions. I have seen no evidence thus far which inclines me to think so. I greatly fear that the coming Budget will show us, to adapt another remark of Oscar Wilde's, that our political masters know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

ends